

BEST WESTERN

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THE ORIGINAL



**TWO GUNS,
TWO FACES**

HE HAD THAT SLOW, LOPSIDED GRIN, AND THAT BLACK-HANDLED GUN TIED DOWN ON HIS LEG, AND WHAT YOU WONDERED RIGHT AWAY WAS, DID RUSS MALLORY HAVE ANOTHER GUN LIKE THAT IN HIS SADDLE-ROLL, AND WAS THAT A FRIENDLY SMILE OR DID IT COVER UP A KILLER?

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FEATURING THE BEST WESTERN NOVELS AND SHORT STORIES

★ ★ GRIPPING FEATURE-LENGTH NOVELET ★ ★

TWO GUNS, TWO FACES

by William Vance

6

No matter what Milo said, the button had never paid any attention. It near drove Milo loco — you know, his own boy and all. And Milo'd bat him, and Russ would just look at Milo with those big black eyes of his. That's how it had been before Russ ran away, but Russ was all grown up now. And back home again . . .

★ ★ GREAT HEART-WARMING NOVEL ★ ★

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So wild and free they seem to be . . .

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THOSE TEXAS COWBOYS

by S. OMAR BARKER

SO WILD AND FREE THEY SEEM TO BE . . .



Oh, Texas steers have hairy ears,

And so have Texas cowboys!

With their rawhide look they can't be mistook

For ordinary plowboys!



They're rough and tough enough to bluff

A cattymount bare-knuckled;

With rope and gun they have their fun,

And ride their broncs unbuckled!



So wild and free they seem to be,

The devil cannot match 'em.

They're never tame—but just the same

A lot of cowgals catch 'em!

HE'D BEEN thirteen years old when he lit out, and here, ten years later, he had the same look about him as when he was a little shaver, sort of like he was going around with a chip on his shoulder and having fun at it.

He put his horse, a mean-looking, wall-eyed, blue-nose roan, right past the big house and up to the bunkshack where I was sitting. He slid down and stood there leaning against his saddle, beating dust out of his clothes, his blue eyes sizing me up without appearing to be too interested.

"You're Pete Nickerson, ain't you?"

HE HAD THAT SLOW, LOPSIDED GRIN, AND THAT BLACK-HANDLED GUN TIED DOWN ON HIS LEG, AND WHAT YOU WONDERED RIGHT AWAY WAS, DID RUSS MALLORY HAVE ANOTHER GUN LIKE THAT IN HIS SADDLE-ROLL? AND WAS THAT A FRIENDLY SMILE OR DID IT COVER UP A KILLER?

Russ flipped Charlie over his head. He moved like a panther.



No matter what Milo said, the button had never paid any attention. It near drove Milo loco — you know, his own boy and all. And Milo'd bat him, and Russ would just look at Milo with those big black eyes of his. That's how it had been before Russ ran away, but Russ was all grown up now.

And back home again . . .

he asked, a slow, lopsided grin spreading over his saddle-brown face. He was holding his hat in his left hand now and he stepped over and offered to shake hands. "Sure wouldn't have bet you'd be here, Pete."

I shook hands with him, the old man not being around any more. "I've outlasted everything on the place but an old jenny," I said. "She's lyin' out in the back corral dyin' of old age now."

He chuckled and that was something different. I'd never remembered him doing much laughing before. But his smile went away quick when he asked, "The old man. What about him?"

"I take it you didn't get the letter then?" I asked him, and saw his headshake. I felt a mite uncomfortable, not knowing how to tell a man his pa has passed on, even when they didn't get along any better than Russ Mallory got along with Milo; that is, the thirteen years they was together.

"No, Pete," he said, still shaking his head. "I didn't get no letter."

"Effie sent it to El Paso," I said. "Effie sort of looked out for your pa in his last days."

"Haven't been in El Paso in two years," Russ said. Then his voice became musing as he said, "So he's gone, eh," like maybe he'd figured on that. "And here me thinking all the time he was too mean and ornery to die just like an ordinary man."

I was some shocked. Not at death, having seen it first-hand a good many times in my fifty-odd years but because even if Russ and Milo didn't hit it off, Russ shouldn't ought to have thought about his pa like that. Not any more, not with old Milo buried now on yonder hill and the red earth still raw on his grave.

Just about that time Effie come to the door and shaded her eyes from

TWO GUNS, TWO FACES

GRIPPING FEATURE-LENGTH
NOVELET BY
WILLIAM VANCE



Russ was sitting on Milo's desk, his sixgun resting on his thigh, right in line with Charlie's body.

the sun. Effie's a nice chunk of a gal, near six foot tall, with hair yellow as marigolds and eyes blue as high-meadow flowers. And she's got a sight of white skin that would make even an old codger like me hanker to lay a paw on it. Effie is about the prettiest gal in these here parts but like I said, she's a tall gal and say what you might about big men in the West, a sight of 'em are runtier than all get-out and she had a time finding a man she could look up to. Most of them, why, she could eat a bowl of soup right off their heads.

I could see her perk up when she seen this tall one, Russ Mallory, leaning there on his cayuse, with his crisp black hair curling around his big ears, his hat still in his left hand and sort of waving his other hand around while he told me what he'd seen in a month of riding clean across from the High Pecos to Oregon.

"Scuse me, Russ," I said and hobbled over to where Effie was still standing with a hungry look in them pretty eyes.

"Git that look off your face, gal," I said. "That's Russ Mallory."

IT WAS gone, in a minute and I felt kind of guilty. But I shouldn't, because old Milo'd told the gal a heap during the time she looked out for him and she'd sort of figured out just what Russ was like before she ever laid eyes on him. It wouldn't help Russ none, either, the way I seen it.

"So he finally decided to come home?" she muttered and bit her red lips with some of the finest choppers in these parts. She looked at me. "Ask him if he's had dinner."

"Well, it's near supper time," I said. "If he ain't had dinner maybe he can wait a little longer and combine 'em. He's looks kind 'o hungry."

"He's lean," she said. Then she pressed her lips together. "I wouldn't let a mule go hungry. Go ask him to come in like a regular man and make himself known and get a bite to eat."

"Yes'm," I said and hobbled back over to Russ.

"Who's the lady?" Russ grinned.

"She's the gal took care o' your pa," I said and got a little satisfaction

out of his interest. When he'd been a pup he just didn't give a doodly-damn for anything. The old man'd bring him a new rig from town, new boots, pants, fancy red shirt with white flowers on the pockets and a five gallon hat from John B. in Chicago. The kid would just look at them solemn-like and go right on wearing his old levi's. Like to drove old Milo crazy, he did. Nothing he could do for the boy. He was some different.

"What was wrong with the old codger, anyway?" Russ asked. "What'd he die of besides meanness?"

"Well, Russ, he got a little touched in the head. That's why Effie come out to look for him. She's one of them nurse gals. She's big enough to handle most men."

"That she is," Russ said admiringly, looking so hard that Effie went back inside the house. He chuckled a little bit. "What'd you say ailed the old man?"

"Why, Russ, nothing ailed him. Somebody hit him on the head. Right down there in the blacksmith shop."

The smile went off Russ' face and he got a cold sort of look in his black eyes. "Killed? Why, Pete?"

I shook my head. "Ain't no telling, Russ. Guess Milo made a lot o' enemies in his time. When you was no bigger than knee-high to a horny toad, he was a mighty active sheriff. Sent the Clayton gang up the river and they vowed they'd get him. They got out just last month. Or it coulda been any one of a number o' people who hated his guts."

"He had a lot of enemies," Russ said softly, "but they usually were men who didn't walk the straight and narrow, Pete."

I looked at him, surprised, not knowing he'd ever had a thought like that. I saw Effie peeking out a window and right quick said, "Effie wants to know, you hungry? And whether you're hungry or not, get up there and say howdy."

"It's going to be a pleasure," Russ grinned, cocky and his tail feathers all smooth again, like he'd forgot old Milo in a wink.

Effie met us at the door. She'd put a fresh-starched gingham dress on and over that a frilly little apron. She

shook hands with Russ like a man and said, "Welcome home, Russ."

"It is a welcome," he grinned.

Her friendliness and smile was gone in a flash. I sort of wished Russ could know she was thinking he was disrespectful, with his pa not buried more than two weeks. But then she couldn't know really how it was with them two, either.

"There's something on the table," she said, sort of dignified and formal like. She turned and went through the big old parlor and into the kitchen.

CHAPTER

2

Charles Luttrell

RUSS WENT through the parlor real slow, looking at things, especially the big picture in a gold frame of his pa and ma. He'd never known his ma because she died when she gave birth to him, but I'd seen him stand and stare at that picture of her minutes on end, his face solemn and his black eyes big and unblinking.

The organ was there yet, the one the old man had brought all the way from back East for his bride and she'd not played it more than two or three times. All the needlework and everything she'd done and it was still there just like she'd left it, except since Effie come out she'd took everything down and washed and starched and ironed till hell wouldn't have it and everything in there was slick and shiny as a new penny.

Russ' Adam's apple kind of bobbed up and down a little and he hurried on into the kitchen. When he got in there that eternal grin was back on his face.

"Sure redded the old place up," he said and sunk down into the kitchen chair like a big prowling cat.

I noticed then the black-handled gun tied down on his leg. The kind a man wears when he's carrying another one in his saddle-roll. And what made it especially notable was that it was getting around to the time when most men left their guns home, or else carried them under their coattails.

"Thank you." She sounded real correct. She poured coffee for him. She

turned to me with a big smile and said, "You'd better have a cup too, Pete."

I sat down on the other side of the table and sugared and creamed my coffee while Effie got me a sizeable chunk of pie.

"I guess you're wondering," Effie said, "about your father."

"Not too much," Russ said carelessly. He stopped chewing and asked, "Who got the place?"

Effie looked at me frowningly and back to Russ with that wrinkle still between her blue eyes. "Charlie Luttrell," she said.

Russ laughed out loud. "I might have known," he said. He got up and went out the back door. I could hear the well chain clanking and knew he was drawing water. I remember him hanging over that well when he was just a button. And Milo yelling, 'Get away from that well, boy! Want to drop in and drowned?'

Whatever Milo said, the button never paid any attention. It near drove Milo loco. Even when he'd lose his temper and tan Russ' bottom, the button wouldn't cry or beg like a lot of youngsters. He'd just take it and look at Milo with them big black eyes and go on about his business. Near drove Milo crazy. 'Don't know what I'm goin' to do with that boy,' he'd say.

Effie was standing there by the table with her hands clenched. "I can't stand," she began, "I just can't stand a man that's got no feeling."

"You don't know how it was," I started to say. "Not with him and Milo. They was at one another's throats all the time. 'Bout the blamdest things. Nothing at all. Milo was as easy-going a man as I ever run acrost, most o' the time. But Russ could set him sizzling in a flash. All he'd have to do was walk toward the corral.

"'Get away from them hosses,' Milo would roar. The boy wouldn't even act like he'd heard. Keep right on walking. Milo'd be after him like a streak o' greased lightnin'. Bat him on the bottom 'til I thought he'd bust Russ' britches. The button wouldn't let out a sound. Just look at him with

them big black eyes o' his'n and go on about his business."

"His eyes are black," Effie said. "Really black."

"Just like his ma." I looked at her and she looked at me and she sort of reddened up, which was awful easy to see because her skin's so soft and white.

Russ came clumping back in, water dripping off his chin, smacking his lips. "Haven't tasted water like that since I left," he said. He swung down astraddle his chair, reminding me more than ever of a big mountain cat and rolled a cigarette, never spilling a flake of tobacco on Effie's clean-scrubbed floor and her watching like a hawk.

"Now, tell me all about it, Pete. About the old man getting bashed on the head."

Effie gasped out loud and said, "Well, I never," and turned and marched out of the room.

RUSS GOT up and went after her with long strides and caught up with her in the parlor. I could see them standing there close together, with the westerling sun splashing light on them through the curtained window and she was nearly as tall as him and they made a purely handsome pair.

"I been looking for a gal like you all my years," Russ was saying. His voice was low but by straining my ears I could hear. He had both her hands held in his'n, and he was standing close enough to lean down his head a mite and kiss her, if he'd been a mind to do it.

She pulled away. "I haven't any use for a man who don't care for his kin-folks," she said. "Such a man can't be trusted. A man is all a woman has and if she can't depend on him she's not got anything at all."

Russ was laughing, with his white teeth flashing and his head thrown back and them black curly ringlets bouncing over his ears and saying, "Kinfolks are people, Effie, darlin'. Just like anybody else. They got no special rights just because they happen to be kinfolks."

She jerked her hands loose and

turned and walked away from him, out of doors.

Russ came back in and planted himself astraddle the chair again, shaking his head. "She's got more spunk than the law allows," he said. The smile went off his face and he said, "Tell me about the old man, Pete. Everything."

"Not much to tell, Russ," I said. "Milo was in fair to middlin' shape far as everything goes but up here." I tapped my head, not wanting to call old Milo crazy. "Not bad up there, even. He'd take a notion he wanted to cut down a tree in the front yard. Effie'd stop him from hackin' a half dozen times on some days. She had a way with him, she did. Only one could handle him. She knew what he could do and what he couldn't. He couldn't chop down the only dad-gum tree on the place and she'd tell him so."

"She's got a way, all right," Russ said, sort of dreamy-like.

"Well, one place she let him go was the blacksmith shop. Milo always down there, hammering things out. You see 'em comin' in, I reckon."

Russ nodded. "Wondered about it. Fancy ironwork all over the place. The old man must of got pretty good."

"Sure did," I nodded. "Well, week ago Saturday night, we're all just getting ready for the dance. Everybody was goin' but Milo. He wanted to work in the smithy. I got the forge goin' for him and put on enough coal to last him his fill. Me and the boys just ridin' off when Milo come out o' the smithy and yelled for me t' wait. I rode over and he said, 'When y' pass Luttrell's, tell Charlie I want to see him. Mighty important, Pete. Be sure and tell him.' He looked at me and for once he wasn't off in that world o' his own, like he got sometimes."

Russ had his chin on his hands, staring down at the floor.

"I told him real nice-like, 'Milo, Charlie's figgerin' on goin' to that dance.'"

"Don't give a darn what he figures," Milo snapped. "Jes' tell him to get over here, Pete."

"And Charlie got the ranch?" Russ asked real quiet.

"Sure did," I nodded. "And everything else. An' he'd like t' get Effie, too."

"Did Charlie show up like the old man asked?" Russ wanted to know.

"Said he did. Said the old man was talking wild, out of his head and that he left right away. Not wanting to miss the dance, he said."

"What time did you all leave?" Russ asked, his eyes cloudy, like he was thinking hard.

"About six, I reckon," I said. "Maybe a few minutes later, account Milo holding me up. Within ten minutes of past six, Russ."

"Did you see Charlie at the dance?"

Effie spoke from the door. She'd come back in unheard by either one of us. "He was there, Russel. He came about ten o'clock. I asked about Milo and he said he left him working in the blacksmith shop."

RUSS COCKED his head at her and his seriousness was all gone, grinning at her like a chessey cat, his black eyes sparkin' and he said, "Hope you had a good time. I guess Charlie's quite a dancer."

She didn't smile. Just tipped that golden head and said, "The best in these parts." She turned away.

Russ got up and his smile was gone. "The smithy just like it was when Milo was there?"

"Sure is," I told him. "We got home pretty late, Russ. Near daylight. I could hear the rooster crowin'. The smithy door was open, I noticed first off. Old Milo was hell on that door bein' closed when he wasn't around. So I looked in. He lay there by the anvil—"

"Wait a minute," Russ said. "Wait until we get down there. Then tell me some more."

We walked down past the corral. A couple of the boys was sitting on the top rail jawing about what was going to happen now that Milo was gone. They slid to the ground and I introduced them to Russ, noticing that they had a plumb sorrowful air about 'em. I guessed they was wishin' Russ would get the spread instead of Charlie Luttrell.

The smithy was just other side of

the big hay barn, a building all to itself. Milo didn't want any of the other buildings to catch fire in case the smithy went up in smoke. We used to have a full-time blacksmith but Jed Lorenzo had died a few years back and Milo wouldn't replace him. Said he just couldn't stand the thought of someone working in Jed's shop, so Milo bein' real handy with tools did most of the backsmithin' except shoeing bad hosses and any cowhand worth his salt can shoe a hoss. So we'd got along.

I told Russ all that as we walked along.

I pushed open the door of the smithy. It was sort of gloomy in there and smelled like coal dust and iron and just plain blacksmith shop smells, like old hoof carvings and hickory handles for posthole diggers and such.

The anvil sat right in the middle of the board shack which is fourteen by fourteen. I know because I helped build it. There's a big wooden tub just to one side, filled with scummy water, for taking the heat out of hot iron.

The forge was to the left, a home-made rig, all except for the bellows which Milo ordered from Sears and Roebuck when the old bullhide bellows broke down a couple years back. There's plowshares, horseshoes, branding irons, wheel rims and wagon parts hanging from the walls and rafters. A couple of big wheels to be fixed standing in one corner.

Russ walked over to the anvil and picked up a hammer. He let it fall on the anvil and it sang out sort of musical. Russ said, "He was working right here when somebody cracked him?"

I nodded and walked around Russ to stand on the other side of the anvil. "He was on this side, facin' the door."

Russ looked at me quick. "He must have known who did it," he said. "He'd never let anybody he didn't know stand at his back. He'd been too many places." His face was sort of grim and remembering.

I'd go along with that. I said, "The sheriff come out. Said one o' the men who'd had trouble with Milo at some

time or other must of cracked him. Said there was so many of them he'd probably never find out who it was done the killin'."

"Who's sheriff?" Russ asked.

"Old man Tunkett. You should know him."

Russ said, "Yes." And added: "The old man had a lot of enemies."

"All of us thought the same thing," I said. "There was some talk about Charlie but fact is he showed up at the dance. An' accordin' to the amount o' coal burned down in the forge, Milo must o' worked 'til near midnight."

"What was he working on?" Russ asked and all the time he was asking questions he was walking around the smithy, poking into this, that and the other.

"Blessed if I know," I said. I went over and rolled up my sleeve and ran my hand down in the scummy water in the tub. I came up with a few pieces of Milo's fancy ironwork. I looked up at Russ and he was standing there with a funny look on his face. He was standing by a coal oil lantern hanging from a nail.

"He use this for light?"

"Sure did. Couldn't see in the dark, though some o' the boys swore he could."

"Did you fill it with oil before you left?" Russ asked.

I thought about that for a minute and then shook my head. "Sure didn't, Russ. It was gettin' low on oil and kind o' smokin' a little and I was goin' to fill it and Milo told me to go on or I'd be late for the dance."

"Uh-huh," Russ kind of grunted and then he went around the shop, bent down, looking. He straightened and looked at me. "What'd the killer hit him with?"

"The sheriff said a crowbar," I said, feeling sort of uncomfortable. But Russ didn't seem to hear me. He was standing there with a little piece of something in his hand. Looked like a little piece of wood. He sort of absent-minded like put it in his pocket and went over to the forge. He stood there looking down in the dead ring of ashes for a long time, with his hands behind his back. He was stand-

ing there when Charlie Luttrell walked into the shop.

"Hi there, Russ," Charlie said.

CHAPTER

3

Just A Hunch

RUSS SWUNG around, quick as a cat. He stood there looking at Luttrell and I was struck by the similarity between them. Actually, there ain't no reason why they shouldn't look alike, because they come of the same blood, Charlie's mother being Milo's one and only sister, before she passed on five or six years ago.

She had kept house for Milo after her old man run off with Belle O'Bannon, a dance hall girl in town, when Charlie was not much more than five or six. It always sort of struck me that maybe most of the trouble between Milo and Russ was the doin' of Charlie and Charlie's mother.

They stood there staring at one another and then I saw they wasn't so much alike after all. Charlie's face was kind of narrow and his eyes closer together. Charlie was the handsomer of the two, sort of pale-skinned which went good with that big shock of black hair. His eyes would light on you and then flick off some 'ers else right quick. Always sort of bothered me, in a way.

Russ grinned. "Cousin Charlie, I believe."

Charlie didn't smile back. He said, "Wait outside, Pete."

"I can wait in town," I said, nettled by the way he was telling me he had something private to tell Russ.

"That'll be all right too," he said in that smooth, easy way of his.

I looked at Russ. Russ still had that grin on his face and he was still looking at Charlie like he was seeing him for the first time.

"Go ahead, Pete," Russ said softly. "I'd like to hear this."

I would have too. So much that I leaned against the smithy to roll a smoke and I heard Charlie's quick voice, sounding some mad, saying, "Sooner you get out of here the better. No place for you on the Running

M, Russ. You kicked the old man in the teeth once too often."

Russ' voice was quiet and even. "You're all worked up for nothing, Charlie. I didn't know the old man was gone until I rode in. And I'm riding along as soon as I look into a few things."

"Like what?" Charlie's question came like a shot and his voice was up a little louder.

"Like who hit the old man on the head," Russ said easily.

"Just ask the sheriff," Charlie said, real nasty-like. "There's a hundred men who'd have liked to done it."

"Including yourself," Russ said.

Charlie cursed. "Watch what you say, Russ. I used to kick the stuffing out of you when you was a kid. I can still do it."

"I've been wondering about that," Russ said, still real soft-voiced and it sounded so much like old Milo when he was gettin' ready to pull a whing-ding, I wanted to see Russ's face.

I heard a grunt and another curse. I went around to the door of the smithy in time to see Charlie come backing out, flailing his arms like a windmill to keep from falling down. Russ was following him.

Charlie got his balance and stood there with a trickle of blood running down from the corner of his lip, his black hair hanging down in his eyes. He cursed again and threw his head back to get the hair out of his eyes and went in with his arms working like one o' them steam engine drivers.

Russ backed away grinning but his voice was more like a wolf's snarl. "Won't be easy as it used to, Charlie."

Charlie swung a roundhouse that sent up smoke signals. Russ leaned backward and let it go by and then he reached out his foot and put it behind Charlie's ankle and pushed gently with his hand against Charlie's shoulder. Charlie flew into the ground like he'd been pitched from a bucking cayuse. He scrambled up and leaped at Russ and wrestled him and they fell on the ground. Some of the boys were beginning to gather 'round by then.

Them two rolled over and over, punching each other every chance they got and they wound up against the smithy wall with Charlie on top. Charlie had his two hands on Russ' throat and he was bearing down, with Russ pulling at his hands.

THE BOYS were making a few bets.

The home guard were letting sentiment get the best of them, I thought. They were laying even money on Charlie. Me and couple of the other boys who didn't think we'd be around much longer was busy covering it.

Russ couldn't break Charlie's grip and his face was turning the color of an old beet. He threw his legs up and hooked Charlie's neck and pulled him backward. Charlie's fingers left red furrows on Russ's throat. Russ flipped him over and got to his feet. He moved like a panther.

Charlie scrambled up and threw himself at Russ all in the same motion. Russ back away and all of a sudden his fist shot out and Charlie's head flew back fit to come off. He whammed back into the smithy and bounced off the wall and crumbled on the ground, limp as a piece of well-worked rawhide. Me and the other boys went around collecting our winnings and there was a flash of color and Effie was down on the ground on her knees beside Charlie, wiping his bloody face with a little bit of a handkerchief.

She looked up at Russ and her blue eyes were full of fire and brimstone. "You roughneck," she blazed at Russ. "You unspeakable roughneck. Your father not two weeks in his grave and you fighting your very own cousin."

"He started it," Russ said, with the old reckless grin on his face. "He started it all by himself."

"Charlie doesn't like to fight," she said, as though that settled it. "He hates fighting. Just like me."

"That's not the way I learned it," Russ said, the grin fading away. He looked at me. "Pete, I guess you're out of a job. Want to ride into town with me?"

The fire went out of Effie's eyes but she still kneeled there over Char-

lie, I could see her out of the corner of my eye, watching Russ move away and there was a sort of regret on her smooth face.

It didn't take me no time to saddle up my Sunday riding horse. And it didn't take me that long to get my warbag out of the bunkhouse. I'd been expecting my walking papers ever since Milo cashed in.

Russ was waiting, sitting his pony, and together we struck out for town.

He'd got some broody and I let him go, not wanting to disturb his thoughts. He raised his head all of a sudden and said, "Pete, what kind of sheriff is Tunkett?"

"Well, he's for Tunkett first and after that he's a pretty good sheriff."

"That's the jasper the old man had so much trouble with, ain't he?"

I said, "Sure is. But they settled their differences about the line between their property long ago. But they was never real friendly after that. Old man Tunkett was just plain crazy to buy the Running M. Used to ride over about once a month and make Milo an offer. He wanted Milo's ranch so bad it hurt. An' looks like maybe he'll get it."

Russ raised his head quick and swung around in his saddle to look at me. "How's that?"

"Everybody knows Charlie'll sell," I said. "All they're waitin' on is the will to be probated or whatever it is they do with them."

Russ nodded. He sighed and said, "The old man would hate that. I'll bet he'd never left—" He broke off and went back into his old brood. That's how it was when we reached town.

He said, "I was planning to see Tunkett but I guess I won't." He pulled up in front of the Lonesome Cowboy.

We racked our ponies and went in to cool off and wet down.

We had one and I asked him, "What'd you want to see Tunkett for?"

He studied his glass. "Just a hunch," he said. He rapped his glass on the bar. "Can't stand on one leg, Pete. Let's have another."

CHAPTER

4

A Killer

HE HAD ANOTHER and then another and another and then I lost track of them. Anyway, the sun was getting real low when I got the drift I'd had one too many on an empty belly. Me and Russ went out the door and I don't know who was holding up who. We wobbled over to our ponies and a buckboard come busting down the street.

Russ said, "Look who's here," as he followed his skittery pony around and around, trying to get a foot in the stirrup.

The buckboard stopped on two bits and Effie stared at Russ. "Of all things," she exclaimed. "Russel Mallory!"

"Sweetheart," Russ said, finally finding the stirrup. He swung up and the pony did a couple of crowhops and nearly landed him on his dusty. He pulled off his hat and swept the ground with it and almost didn't come up. "Sweetheart, will you marry me?"

Her blue eyes were shooting out little sparks. "I wouldn't marry you if you were the last man on earth," she said. "Fighting and drinking. You ought to be ashamed of yourself!"

"Am," he said, real woozy, his eyes just slits. "Sure am, Effie darlin'. But if I was la'sh man on earth you'd be trampled in the rush."

She slapped her reins against the rumps of her ponies and barrelled down the street.

Russ looked after her and suddenly he didn't look like a man on the mountain. He said, "Come on, Pete," and loped down the street.

The fresh air cooled my fevered brow and cleared my head. But I was hungry enough to eat a steer, hide, horns and hoofs. "I'm hungry," I said, when night come down and Russ kept up that mile-eating lope. "Where we going?"

"Just following a hunch," he said.

"For a young feller you're sure getting a lot of hunches," I told him and could see a flash of white in the

dark that was his teeth. Always grinning, no matter what.

We pulled up on the Running M, must of been about nine or ten. The moon was just comin' out. The bunkhouse was dark and there was one lighted window in the big house, in Milo's office. But Russ didn't head for the house. He stopped in back of the big corral and said, "Let's leave our horses right here, Pete."

Now I'd lived my workin' years on that ranch but all at once it seemed a different place with me and Russ sneaking around like we was. "Why don't we just go right in?" I asked.

"Charlie started that fight this evening," he said, "just to keep me from nosing around. What's he got to hide, Pete?"

"Don't ast me," I said. "I'm no range detective, Russ."

He chuckled. "You will be before we get through," he said and stopped in front of the smithy door. He went in and pulled me in after him and said, "Light that lantern, Pete, and let's have some light."

I groped my way over to the lantern and got it off the hook and went to the corner where the big five gallon can of coal oil stood. I unscrewed both caps, one from the lantern and one from the coal oil can and got the durn thing filled without spilling too much. The can was plumb full. I dropped the cap for the lantern reservoir and was feeling around for it.

"Where's that light?" Russ asked.

"In a minute," I grumbled. "Dropped the dad-blasted cap."

He came over and helped me search for it. He pushed the coal oil can aside and said, "Hey, Pete, this can's full."

"Yeah, 'cept for what I just took out."

"Did you fill up the big can since the old man was found out here?"

"Nope. Here's the cap." I screwed it onto the lantern reservoir and struck a match and pushed up the chimney and stuck the match to the wick. It smoked a little and then settled down. "Wick ought to be trimmed."

"That can wait," he said. "We'll just be a minute, Pete." He took the lantern and went over to the

forge. He used a pair of tongs to lift up a ring of ashes that'd fused together from the heat. He put the light down and looked and looked.

"What do you expect to find?" I asked.

"A killer," he said and he wasn't smiling, his young face furrowed with a frown. "Where do you keep the coal, Pete?"

"Just outside the door," I said, and while I wondered, I didn't ask because somehow or other he looked like old Milo when hell was about to pop.

I followed him outside and he squatted there by the coal pile letting the slack run through his fingers. "Where does it come from?" he wanted to know.

"There's a surface seam up north a ways," I said. "Just beyond the meadows, the place your pa and Tunkett fell out about. We dig it and haul it in the wagon. Milo made us bust it up with a sledge and water it down for the forge. Was real fussy about his blacksmith coal."

"Uh-huh," Russ grunted, squatting there, his face real serious in the lantern light. He swung his head around to look at me. "Pete, burn the road to town. Get the U. S. Marshal and bring him out here fast as you can."

"It's kinda late," I said.

He nodded. "But not too late. Get him out here one way or another."

I stood up. "I'll do my best," I said and started for my pony tied in back of the big corral. When I got aboard with my belly still thinking my throat was cut, I could see the lantern bobbing toward the big house.

Well, I had one devil of a time getting Toll Roberts, the U. S. Marshal, out of bed. And I had an even worse argument on my hands trying to convince him he should go out to the Running M. I finally did, though, and when he heard how long it'd been since I had something to eat, he even scared me up a ham bone to gnaw on. I was still chewing it when we got to the ranch.

The light was still on in Milo's office. We looped our reins around the hitching rack and jangled up the steps and Toll knocked on the door, grumbling about a job that brought

him out all hours and in all kinds of weather.

Russ yelled, "Push open the door and come right in!"

CHAPTER

5

Just Sore

I'LL NEVER forget that room. Russ was sitting on Milo's desk, swinging a free foot, with his six-shooter resting on his thigh. Right in line with its muzzle, Charlie Luttrell was sitting in the big desk chair, looking as though he'd got a feather in his throat and couldn't get it up or down.

Charlie saw Toll Roberts and he jumped up.

"Sit down," Russ said and waved his gun and Charlie went right back down in the same motion he'd used to get up.

"What's goin' on here?" Toll hollered, his eyes going from Charlie to Russ and back to Charlie. "Howdy, Russ. Long time no see."

Russ was grinning that eternal grin, white teeth all showing. He said, "I got a murderer for you, Toll. I couldn't call in Sheriff Tunkett, because Tunkett already knows who killed my pa."

It was funny hearin' him say "pa" like that. He'd never used the word in my hearing that I could remember. I heard a strangled sort of sound then and my eyes bugged out. Effie was sitting in one dark corner with her eyes as big as a Mex dollar.

She said, "Thank heaven you're here, Marshal."

Russ just laughed. "I'll show you, Toll," he said and stood up.

Toll's eyebrows came together and if he'd just scraped his foot he'd of looked like an old muley getting ready to wreck a hoss and rider. "You'd a damn sight better," he said. "And make it good. I don't see like I did when I was your age."

"Good thing, too," Russ grinned. His grin went away quick when he looked at Charlie. "Charlie was here the night my pa was killed. Everyone knows that. And Charlie thought he had an alibi."

"I have," Charlie said quickly. "I

mean I can prove where I was when Milo was killed. Me and Effie didn't get home from the dance 'til broad daylight."

Russ nodded. "Yeah. All this happened before."

"Milo was still working, long after I left," Charlie said.

"Let Russ talk," Toll said, real interested.

Russ put his gun away. He said, "I got my first suspicion when I was prowling around the smithy. Pete here told me the lantern Milo used to work with was empty. He was going to fill it before he went to the dance but Milo told him to go on or he'd be late. He was already going to lose some time, stopping off to tell Charlie that Milo wanted to see him. That right, Pete?"

"Sure is," I said. "Just like it happened."

"Well, Milo didn't fill that lantern. It was dry when Pete and I tried it just a little while ago."

"Milo must have filled it," Charlie said. "He probably filled it and it burned out."

Russ shook his head. "No, Charlie," he said softly. "Milo didn't fill it. Only coal oil on the place was in a five gallon can in the shop. And it was plumb full, wasn't it, Pete?"

"Plumb full," I said.

"That don't prove nothing," Luttrell cried. "That don't prove a thing, Russ. You're just sore because Milo left me the ranch."

RUSS STARED at Charlie with the coldest eyes a man ever had. He didn't say anything, just stared, and I swear Charlie would have slunk away like a coyote if I hadn't been standing in the door with that ham-bone in my hand.

Charlie said, "It's crazy, that's what. You think you should have the ranch, yet you never said a decent word to your old man in your life—" He shut up quick as Russ took one step in that direction and then stopped, looking at Effie.

She looked right back at him like he was something that crawled.

Toll hollered, "Well, get along with it." He was touchy as a two-year-old steer with a fresh underbit.

"We'll let that go, Charlie," Russ said, real quiet and low. He looked around the room and said, "Charlie was real smart. He doused the fire in the forge and took out all the coal and threw it back on the coal pile outside the door. You can still see some of the ashes there."

"It's a lie," Charlie screeched and his face was white as snow.

Russ didn't pay him any heed. He said, "Then Charlie got a burned ash ring from the ash pile and set it in the forge to make it look like Milo worked until he burned up all his coal. Only trouble was, he set it in crooked, so it didn't fit tight as it should have. Another trouble was, he forgot about the lantern."

Effie sort of gasped and got whiter than ever. Just two red spots glowed on her cheekbones.

"Some dreaming," Charlie sneered. But there was a white line around his mouth which was loose and his eyes were going around from one of us to the other like a coyote in a trap.

Toll was getting real interested, not even rubbing his eyes and yawning any more.

Russ leaned over and picked up a six-gun from Milo's desk. I hadn't noticed it before. "This yours, Charlie?" he asked.

Charlie looked at the gun. "You ought to know," he said. "You took it off me just an hour or so ago."

Russ flipped the gun over and grabbed it by the barrel and shoved it to the marshal. "Look at that handle, Marshal," he said. "See where the wooden part is busted?"

Toll took the gun and looked at it, nodding. "Grip's sure split off," he said.

Russ reached a hand into his pistol pocket and brought out a little piece of wood. He leaned over and shoved it against the handle. It fitted like a shell in a six-shooter. "Charlie hit my pa with his gun and busted that handle," he said. "I picked up that piece of wood down in the smithy—"

A curse interrupted Russ. It came from Charlie Luttrell and he crouched there against the wall, holding a .41 derringer in his hand. He was shaking all over except that hand holding the gun and it was dead on Russ's belly

and steady as a fence post. He couldn't have missed blindfolded and them .41's sure tear a hole in a man's guts.

"You son," he bubbled at Russ, "always in the road and by hell I'm going to drill you, right in your blasted guts." He was frothing at the mouth he was so mad.

I threw the ham bone. It smacked Charlie right between the eyes. The gun went off but the bullet whammed into the ceiling and then Russ clipped him, knocking him back against the wall, where he lay squawling he hadn't meant to do it.

Effie was sitting there with a look of pure horror on her face and in her eyes.

Russ wasn't smiling. Not any more. He was sitting there on the desk, looking down at Charlie, his dark eyes shadowed and his mouth grim. He said, "He treated you like a son. More like a son than he did me. Yet you killed him—"

"He didn't, he didn't," Charlie screeched. "He was always talking about you, how good you was and what a man you'd turned out to be. He was always throwing you up to me. And when he told me he'd changed his will, taking the ranch away from me, I lost my head. I didn't mean to hit him so hard. Just wanted to knock some sense into his head."

Russ was standing there while Toll pushed Charlie through the door. He told Russ before he left that he'd prefer charges against Tunkett.

Then there was the three of us.

"How can you ever forgive me?" Effie wanted to know.

Russ was grinning all over again, "Why, that's easy," he said. "Just come over here."

She went over there and stood in front of him. Tall she was, near as tall as him, and I could just see the way it done her good to have a man she could look up to. I mean really.

Russ reached out a long arm and gathered her in and pulled her up close. Her mouth was open and her blue eyes wide as both barn doors open. She said, "Russ, I want you to forgive me but I could never trust a man who didn't think well of his kin-folks."

(Please turn to page 36)

TOO TOUGH

Let some local ranny so much as look at Jessica Coldiron and Mitch Gaines promptly put the unfortunate fellow to the Mitch Gaines Manhood Test....

by
**HASCAL
GILES**



Jessica knelt beside Steve Buckley.

MITCH GAINES stepped into the lobby of the Plains House almost on tiptoe, making sure that his pointed spurs didn't dig into the thick red Brussels carpet and send him sprawling across the floor of Station's most elaborate hostelry.

The desk clerk, a balding little man in a starched white collar too big for his neck, glanced up at him and gulped. "You—you get right out of here, Mr. Gaines," the man said. "Miss Coldiron said you might try to intrude, and that I should send you away. Now if you'll please—"

Mitch Gaines smiled. "You're funny," he said, and strode between the two big potted plants which framed

the doorway to the dining room. The clerk started around the counter to follow him, his hand raised in protest. Mitch paused, settling his feet so that his boot heels sank into the carpet. The clerk gulped and stayed where he was.

At the doorway, Mitch spent a few seconds running his eyes over the polished brass chandeliers which hung from the ceiling of the dining room, and then he gave his attention to the tables. In a corner to his right, he saw a mass of golden curls tumbling down a woman's trim back and for a moment a look of tenderness settled over his freckled face.

Mitch removed his big brown Stet-

son, stared speculatively at it, and changed his mind. He ran a bony hand through his short-cropped red hair and settled the hat back on his head. He tugged at the wide brim once, as though he were about to jump into a canyon and wanted to make sure the hat went with him, and began threading his way between the tables.

He stopped behind the girl with the gleaming yellow hair and said, "Evenin', Jess. I was in town, so I thought I'd say howdy."

Jessica Coldiron turned very slowly to look at him. Her full red lips were drawn in a tight line, and the creamy tan of her cheeks began to glow like a crimson sunset. Her glance took a long time making the six-foot-three-inch journey from Mitch Gaines' scuffed work boots to the top of his head.

"Well, you might at least speak to my friends, too," she said coolly. "I believe you met Steve—Mr. Buckley—at the bank the other day."

Mitch shifted his glance across the table as though startled. He squinted at the husky, handsome man in the salt-and-pepper-suit and nodded.

"Why, I'll declare," Mitch said. "He's so pale, though, I couldn't tell him from the tablecloth. How are you, Mr. Buckley?"

Mitch thrust a long arm across in front of Jessica Coldiron and grasped Steve Buckley's hand in his own. He smiled as Buckley winced under the pressure of rope-hardened fingers.

"Won't you join us, Mr. Gaines?" Buckley smiled bravely, but the corner of his glance was inspecting his bruised hand.

"Well, now—"

Mitch didn't get to finish his acceptance. Jessica begged to be excused and grabbed Mitch's arm. She pulled him away toward a side door, and presently they stepped out into a dimly-lit corridor. There she flung his arm away, and placed her hands on her hips.

"Now you listen to me, Mitch." Jessica's voice was a husky, trembling whisper. "I understand your admiration for my father, and I know that you're trying to do what's best for me. But I've got something to say about my life, too. I'm getting tired

of being mixed up in a saloon brawl every two or three weeks, and I think it's about time we forget the Mitch Gaines manhood test."

MITCH RUBBED a brown forefinger along his pointed nose, said innocently: "Why, I didn't know you'd been fightin' in the saloons, Jess. Why'n't you holler and I'd have helped out."

Jessica Coldiron gave him an exasperated look from her round blue eyes and stamped her foot impatiently. "I'm not playing games tonight, Mitch. I've been back in Station for nearly a year, and for the last six months I've seen you start a fight with half a dozen men simply because I happen to have dinner with them or go for a ride with them. Pretty soon, I won't have a friend left!"

Jessica's voice choked off and her eyes clouded up as though tears were close to the surface. Mitch Gaines' craggy face turned sober, and he held a hand tentatively toward her, letting it drop to his side as the girl forced her emotions under control.

"Maybe I'm takin' an old man's charge too seriously," Mitch said thoughtfully. "But somehow I just can't seem to forget the way old Hardrock Hugh Coldiron looked at me just before he cashed in his chips. He said, 'Help Jess find her a man, Mitch, and make sure he's fittin' to father my grandson!' That's all I'm tryin' to do, Jess. Way I figure it, any man who can't lick Mitch Gaines ain't much of a man a-tall."

A sound of disgust came from Jessica Coldiron's pursed lips. "Don't try to make it sound so easy, Mitch. I've known you all my life, you know. Why I remember in school—every day at recess—there was always in it. That's all you know—fighting. So you think that's what Dad meant by helping."

"Maybe," Mitch said. "One thing I know: When a man will stand up and match fists with you, it generally means he's got some guts behind 'em. Right now you've got old man Martin lookin' after things at the bank, but he won't live forever. There's people in Station who'd like to have old Hugh's bank. Maybe they'll try to take it away from you—or your husband."

And you're a mighty pretty girl, Jess. Sometime a man who's got no business grabbin' at you might grab. It might be nasty if there weren't a man around."

She sighed resignedly. "I'm only trying to tell you there are other ways of finding out about people, Mitch. Like Robert Scales, for instance. He was a fine man and a good lawyer, and I was getting very fond of him. And then you came along at the wrong time."

"At the right time, you mean," Mitch growled. "He had no business kissin' you back there in the livery stable, right in public you might say. And when I told him so, he started usin' words I didn't understand. So I had to shove him out of the way a little. And what kind of man was he? One little push and he fell apart like a toadstool."

"I'm not going to argue any more, Mitch. You didn't push him and you know it. You knocked four of his teeth out. It made him so ashamed to be seen around Station that he just packed up and left. And he wasn't kissing me. I was trying to saddle my horse, and it flicked its tail in my eye and he was—"

"That's a lie," Mitch said flatly. "He was holding you just like this and—"

MITCH DECIDED to demonstrate. He swept Jessica Coldiron into his arms and pulled her close to him. Her eyes widened and her lips parted just enough to make the temptation too much to ignore. Mitch Gaines pressed his lips down hard against Jessica's warm mouth, and then he drifted along without thinking until he became aware of someone shaking his shoulder.

He released Jessica, and only then did he realize his shins were stinging where she had been kicking at him. He ran a hand dazedly along his sun-reddened cheek, felt the sensitive line of a scratch there, and peered bewilderedly at Jessica. She looked pale and shaken, but she was suddenly very still.

The hand touched his shoulder again, and Mitch turned to find Steve Buckley frowning at him.

"I'm afraid you've insulted Miss

Coldiron," Buckley said indignantly. "I was disturbed by her long absence, so I decided to look about. She was fighting you, and I must say that looks bad."

Mitch grinned and rubbed his cheek again. "She put up a pretty good fight, too."

"Is that all you have to say?" Buckley's blond eyebrows rose in astonishment.

"What should I say?"

Buckley tugged irritably at the lapels of his coat. "I'd think you should apologize to me. After all, I am her escort for the moment. I demand an apology for me and for her."

Mitch Gaines chuckled. He ran his thumbs along the armpits of his hide vest and took a sliding step toward Steve Buckley.

"No, Steve!" Jessica shouted. "He's going to hit you and—"

The girl darted to Mitch's side, tugging desperately at his cocked right arm. "Wait, Mitch. I might as well tell you that I'm not really having dinner with Steve. He just happened along and sat down. I was waiting for—for Davey Dawson. Steve's only in town for another week, checking the bank's books, and then he'll be gone."

"He's been here two weeks already," Mitch murmured. "Maybe he could finish up sooner if he had some encouragement."

"That is none of your affair," Steve Buckley said sharply. "Right now there is another matter to be settled."

Mitch Gaines shook Jessica Coldiron aside as easily as he'd dust off a cigarette ash. "It's settled, pard," he said between clenched teeth, and swung a looping left hand at Steve Buckley's square jaw.

The impact of Mitch's fist against Buckley's jaw sounded like a cork popping out of a bottle. The blond man stumbled backward along the corridor a few steps and toppled over on his back. Mitch took a step toward him and then shook his head disappointedly as Buckley lay still.

He turned to Jessica, opened his mouth to speak, but he didn't get a chance. At that moment something slammed into him from behind, striking him at the bend of his knees and

shoving him forward. Even as he fell, Mitch grinned tightly. Buckley had merely played possum for a few seconds and there was going to be a fight after all.

As soon as he was down, Mitch gave a fierce backward kick with his legs. He heard Buckley grunt. He rolled away, scrambled to his feet and turned to meet the man.

BUCKLEY was just getting to his knees. Mitch waited until the man straightened, and then he jabbed him lightly with his left hand. A spot of red appeared under the blond man's nose, but he pressed in closer. He was solid and game, but Mitch could see Buckley was using more nerve than skill. Suddenly, Buckley started flailing with both fists, and, before Mitch could cover up, he took a shocking blow under his right eye. He felt the throb of a bruise swelling there, and decided things had gone far enough.

Mitch stopped backing away. He parried with his left hand, causing Buckley to keep raising his chin higher and higher. Mitch ducked a wild blow, and sighted along the length of his own arm. He delivered his cocked right fist a moment later, smashing it squarely on the knot in Steve Buckley's neat string tie. The blond man spun in his tracks once, and then wilted limply to the floor. This time he wasn't playing possum.

Before Mitch could catch his breath, Jessica Coldiron darted past him and knelt beside Steve Buckley's inert form. She lifted his head and patted his bruised face and made a little sobbing sound in her throat.

Mitch sighed in disgust. "He ain't dead, Jess, so don't carry on so. I'll drag him out into the air for you, and have him on his feet in no time."

He started toward her, but at that moment a hard, cold object pressed against his back and a soft voice said, "This isn't the Easy Aces Saloon, Gaines. Before I'll let you wreck my place I'll shoot you."

Mitch knew that voice and he knew the man behind it. He turned slowly and looked into the face of John Curtin, owner of the Plains House. The diamond stickpin in the lapel of his black coat, the only remnant of his

gambling days, looked dull compared to the bright sparks of anger in Curtin's dark eyes.

Curtin was not a man to underestimate, but neither was Mitch Gaines. Mitch stared absently at the snub-nosed derringer in Curtin's hand and let his own hand caress the butt of the heavy sixgun on his leg.

"Why don't you carry a man's gun like everybody else, Curtin?"

"Maybe it's because he deals so seldom with real men."

The answer came from the man who had accompanied John Curtin into the corridor. Mitch had been only vaguely aware of the man's presence, but now he gave him a penetrating glance.

He was big and dark. He stood like a man braced for a challenge, his arms folded calmly across a massive chest. His neck was thick and short, but his craggy face and pale blue eyes seemed full of good humor.

Mitch Gaines' fists balled automatically at his sides. Speaking between clenched teeth, Mitch addressed his question to John Curtin, but his slitted eyes still probed at the dark-haired man's face.

"Now I wonder what he meant by that?" Mitch asked.

The dark one chuckled, said, "Sometimes you see a man who hasn't grown up yet—who still fights over the marbles he's lost."

The fellow wasn't talking sense, as far as Mitch was concerned. He shrugged and shook his head sadly from side to side.

"I wonder if you'd mind steppin' aside just a minute, John," Mitch murmured quietly. "It looks like this feller and me have got somethin' to talk over."

Jessica Coldiron was suddenly in front of Mitch Gaines again. She had left Steve Buckley propped against the wall, groaning groggily, and had been listening anxiously to the new conversation. Now she wagged her finger under Mitch Gaines' nose.

"Now you go on and get out of here, Mitch. You've had your fun for tonight. Davey—Mr. Dawson—made a special trip from Denver to see me, and I'm going to have dinner with him even if I have to let Mr. Curtin kill you first."

JOHN CURTIN took a grip on his derringer like he would be glad to oblige, but Mitch only gave him a disdainful look. An enlightened gleam danced in Mitch's eyes, and he glanced from Jessica to Dawson and then back again.

"Now what kind of grizzly bear whelped him for you, Jess?" Mitch asked patiently.

Jessica tilted her nose in the manner of a woman wearing a crown. She said, "If that's your crude way of asking where I met Davey, I might say it's none of your business. But since you'll probably worry about it all night, I'll tell you. I met him while I was going to school in Denver. He was in the sporting business there."

"Well, I'll declare," Mitch said. He looked Davey Dawson over again, taking in the swell of his shoulders and the easy, graceful way the man carried himself. "I'd guess offhand he was one of them foot-racers. In fact, I bet he can outrun—"

Mitch was easing his way closer to Dawson, but he ran into the barrel of John Curtin's derringer again.

"I mean it, Gaines," Curtin said tonelessly. "I want you out of here, and I don't aim to wait while you play games."

Davey Dawson moved half a step away from John Curtin's shoulder, his heavy brows pulled close above his eyes.

"Let him come on, Curtin. I don't care for his insinuation that I'm afraid of him. We might as well settle it."

"Yeah," Mitch said eagerly. "He's right, Curtin."

John Curtin shook his head, his pale lips thinning. "Not in here. You take Miss Coldiron and go on back to the dining room, Mr. Dawson. There'll be no more brawls at the Plains House."

For a brief interval, Dawson hesitated. Then he reached for Jessica Coldiron's arm and turned away with her.

"Now hold on there, Jess," Mitch said hotly. "I don't reckon you got any business with that gent. You come along with me."

"What?" Jessica's voice was a

screech of unbelief. "Are you giving me orders now, Mitch?"

A flush crept up Mitch's freckled face and he shifted his feet uneasily. "Not exactly, Jess, but I thought we could talk about some things that ought to be discussed."

"Like what?" Jessica asked bluntly.

Mitch couldn't find an answer right away. He moved his lips frantically a time or two and then stammered, "Like—like that colt I've been raisin' for you. The one old Hugh bought last summer and sent out to the Bar G for you to ride when you was in town."

"What's wrong with the colt, Mitch?"

"Nothin'. Nothin', except that I don't aim to have him hangin' around my place another day if you go gallivantin' around tonight with that—that foot-racer!"

A deep breath of anger swelled Jessica's full breasts and she tossed her golden curls defiantly. "All right," she said, "I'll be out to pick him up tomorrow about noon."

She turned quickly and went away, holding Davey Dawson's arm and walking very close to him.

His fists clenched tightly at his sides, Mitch watched them open the door and disappear into the brightness of the Plains House dining room. It took him several seconds to relax, and then he let his breath out very slowly with a husky, "Damn!"

He'd forgotten John Curtin's presence until the hotel man spoke to him. Curtin said, "I like to be friends with folks in Station, but I didn't come here with too good a rep. I've got to run my place straight and clean to live down some things. What's eating you, Gaines?"

Mitch waved his hands despairingly. "Her old man asked me to look after her, that's all."

"Take a favor pretty seriously don't you?"

Mitch looked at Curtin in surprise. "I owe everything I've got to old Hadrock Hugh Coldiron. My old man died when I was sixteen. The Bar G was mortgaged to the hilt and I didn't know it. Instead of closin' me out, Hugh Coldiron lent me more money. He hired hands to run the

ranch and taught me how to make it pay. It's mine now, worth almost as much as old Hugh's bank, I guess. I paid him all the money I owed him, but some things you can't pay back."

CURTIN blew dust from the barrel of his derringer and slipped it into a shoulder holster. "A man gets sentiment and business all tangled up sometimes. You paid the old man interest and you ought to forget it. One day you'll tangle with somebody who'll kill you just because you think you're doing a favor."

"Maybe," Mitch said. "But old Hugh sent for me when the doctor said his ticker was givin' out on him. I sent word to Jess in Denver, but he was gone when she got here. He asked me to see that she either went back to school or found a good man. I aim to do that."

An old grin played over John Curtin's tight lips. "I'd say that's just about settled, Gaines. I hear you've got your own set of standards for a man to meet. Well, this time I figure Miss Coldiron has picked her a man who can pass the test. If I was still a betting man, I'd lay odds on Davey Dawson to drive you into the ground."

Mitch's hard chin jutted belligerently. "As soon as I get a chance I'll prove how wrong you are."

A dry laugh rattled in Curtin's throat. "If I know much about women, you'll get that chance tomorrow. Miss Coldiron will come for her colt tomorrow, and Davey Dawson will come with her."

"I'll be there," Mitch said thoughtfully, and started to leave. His glance touched Steve Buckley's battered face where the blond man still sat against the wall.

"I'd like to see that," Buckley said surlily.

"You'd better get out of town, feller, while you've still got them pretty teeth," Mitch said.

He stalked past the man and went out the side door, gulping at the cool night air. A sickness he did not understand was churning at his stomach.

They came the next day at noon. Mitch Gaines had watched them from far out on the ribbon of road which wound across the plain toward his place, knowing long before they

were close enough to recognize that it was Jessica Coldiron and Davey Dawson.

Mitch leaned nonchalantly against the corral fence until Jessica brought the rig to a halt a few feet away. He strode toward her then, his arm reaching to lift her to the ground. But Davey Dawson was there before him. Dawson leaped down and swung Jessica to the ground as easily as he'd drop the reins.

Jessica shoved her slender hands deep into the slash pockets of her doeskin riding skirt and squinted her eyes around the neatly kept ranch buildings.

"I hope you have the colt ready to be tied on for a trip back to town," she said tautly.

Mitch smiled to himself. "Not exactly. I figured you'd bring Dawson with you, so I thought maybe he could rope the colt for you."

"He's no cowboy, Mitch," she said, avoiding his glance. "If you'll toss a loop on him, we won't waste much of your time."

"There's a world of time, Jess. That's all we've got on this place, is time. I'll show you around some, and then maybe I'll hunt up that colt."

MITCH STARTED off toward the new barn he'd built since Jessica's last visit to the Bar G, and the girl fell in step beside him. He felt her watching him from the corner of her eyes, but she seemed strangely wary and withdrawn. He was almost on the verge of apologizing for tangling with Steve Buckley, when Davey Dawson interrupted his thoughts.

Dawson said, "I don't believe Miss Coldiron would care for a stroll, Gaines. Why don't you fetch the horse and let us be on our way?"

Mitch glanced over his shoulder at Dawson's perspiring face. The man's white silk shirt was soaked with sweat and his square, hard-featured face was beet red.

"Why don't you mind your own business?" Mitch asked quietly.

Dawson's head lifted quickly. He took a step forward and thrust his chin within an inch of Mitch's nose. "Get the horse, Gaines."

This was better than Mitch had hoped for. He had been stalling for time to develop an issue, never dreaming that it could come so easily.

"After a while," Mitch said, his voice low.

"You'll get it now," Davey Dawson said, and Mitch knew the man had come here for a fight.

Mitch gave it to him. He shoved Dawson roughly away from him, and brought up his looping right hand like a shot out of a sling. It was a punch which should have piled Davey Dawson up against the corral fence twenty yards away.

But it didn't. Dawson wasn't there. Mitch blinked in surprise, and then a thunderbolt hit him high on the right cheek. There was a tender spot and a blue bruise already there as a result of his tussle with Steve Buckley the night before. Sharp, jarring pain bounced through Mitch's head and then he bounced through the air.

He hit the ground hard, rolled over on his shoulder and sat up. Davey Dawson was waiting for him. Mitch dived at a stocky leg, meaning to drag the man down. But Dawson's feet were like heat waves, dancing and shimmering in a deceptive little dance. Mitch grabbed only air, and then Davey Dawson was holding him by the shirt collar, dragging him to his feet.

Mitch ground his teeth together and made a growling sound in his chest. He reached over his shoulder and got a handful of Dawson's thick black hair. Holding on, he ducked his head and yanked fiercely. Dawson came sailing over Mitch's head, sending up a shower of dust as he thumped solidly against the ground.

Aware that he had a different kind of opponent, Mitch wasted no time. He plodded toward Dawson, but the man was already on his feet, waiting. Dawson ducked, feinted with his left hand and danced away. Mitch stood still and watched the man groggily. He let him repeat the maneuver again, but just as Dawson started to duck Mitch slammed his right fist into the man's face.

DAWSON went stumbling backward, his nose spurting blood. Far off somewhere Mitch thought he

heard Jessica cry out in alarm, but he didn't have time to be sure.

He waded in on the man again, sure of himself now. But Dawson didn't even fall. He wobbled drunkenly a moment, caught his balance, and came to meet Mitch Gaines.

Mitch grinned wickedly and swung his old-dependable looping right hand. But once again he flailed only at air, and suddenly Davey Dawson was inside the arm. Mitch could not see the blows; they came too fast to count, and after the first one he was too stunned to care. He felt his face being bruised and pounded, and he was aware of tasting dirt in his mouth.

But he kept getting up to hunt Davey Dawson, and finally he began to dream that a horse had thrown him and that a rockslide was covering him up with thousands of tons of rubble.

A splash of cold water in his face brought him to his senses. Mitch sat up, spluttering. He felt the earth rock around him, and then he felt the burning sensation in his face and remembered where he was.

He had a hard time focusing his eyes through the swollen lids, but at last he managed to make out the images of Jessica Coldiron and Davey Dawson. Jessica was holding an empty water pail and Davey Dawson was grinning smugly.

"Well," Jessica demanded, "what have you got to say now, Mitch Gaines?"

Mitch wanted to lie back down and go to sleep. Jessica was crying, he realized, and he knew it was his fault. He had hounded her and bossed her and embarrassed her, and now it seemed sort of foolish. Davey Dawson had passed the only test Mitch had ever required of any of her suitors, but now it seemed completely inadequate.

His long silence was too much for Jessica. She hurried to his side and shook his shoulder gently. "Can you hear me, Mitch? Say something, please—"

"I'd say he's a pretty good man," Mitch murmured doggedly.

Davey Dawson's big shadow fell across Mitch and he saw the man pulling at Jessica's arm. "Let's go
(please turn to page 56)

STRANGERS IN HIS HOUSE

by L. D. GEUMLEK

THE EAST slope of Lobo Mountain was a desolate stretch of burned-out timber, and even after four years the rotting ashes smelled like death. The forest that had once held back the thawing snow was a graveyard of charcoaled stumps and the soil that had been anchored by grass was eroding down to the bare rocks. Lobo Creek was a raging torrent at the first runoff, but later, during the thirsty summer, the springs went dry and the creek became only a bed of white pebbles.

Joe Hobben had worked doggedly all winter building a dirt-fill dam at the place known as The Narrows. Skidding logs from the other side of the burn, he had chopped and blasted and dug and shoveled and hauled, finishing just before the first thaw.

Late in March, the snow was going fast, so he rode up to check on his work. From the high point of the trail, he could see the long narrow lake like a rippled silver sheet behind the dam. Enough water surged over the spillway to fill Lobo Creek from bank to bank.

The brands were unfamiliar and the three horses were unsaddled as if the riders meant to stay awhile. And Joe Hobben hadn't been hankering for any company...

By turning in the saddle, Joe could also see a corner of his ranch where the dark soil already showed a veil of green from fall-seeded alfalfa. He had bought the abandoned place from Matt Carmichael. It was a wedge-shaped bench between Mount Harness on the north and the burned slope on the southwest. Lobo Creek flowed along the upper boundary before falling noisily into a ravine to join Big Bear river.

Below the bench, the land dropped sharply to the dry sage-gray valley floor. Across this flat, a web of roads led to Sandrock, hidden by distance.

Satisfied the dam would hold, Joe touched his heels to his bay mare's flanks and started down the trail. Buster, his shaggy black dog, trotted ahead sniffing out range gossip on



The three visitors were waiting for Joe.

the brush and leaving sign that he, too, had passed this way.

As they rounded a point of rock, Joe sighted his cabin. Black smoke poured from the chimney—someone was stuffing the stove with pine—and there were five horses in the corral: his work team and three others.

"Damn!" Joe snorted irritably. One reason he'd bought the ranch was its isolation. "We got some fool company, Buster."

Carmichael had left a two-room cabin with a small shed that Joe used for storage of meat, seed and dynamite. There was only an open shed in the corral for the horses, but almost enough logs for a barn were piled on the bank of the creek.

Buster squatted beside the corral gate as Joe looped a rein over a post and studied the three strange horses. The brands were unfamiliar and they had been unsaddled as if the riders meant to stay a while.

Joe scratched the back of his head, tipping his dusty black hat down over his forehead. "We'll tell 'em to move on," he said and Buster's tail thumped agreement.

Then Buster began to creep forward, teeth bared and a snarl rasping in his throat.

Joe whirled. Mort Dankle had come noiselessly around the shed. Mort was a heavy man with a swarthy, lined face and Joe knew him by sight and reputation as a quarrelsome, trouble-making hanger-on at the Sandrock saloons.

"What're you doing here?" Joe demanded.

Mort drew one of his two guns, pointing it at Buster's head. "Call off that brute."

"Come here, Buster," Joe said. The dog halted but did not retreat and his snarl became more threatening.

"Back!" Joe said. The dog turned reluctantly and came to Joe's side. Mort holstered his gun.

"Now get off the place," Joe ordered. "Saddle up and start drifting, you and your pals, whoever they are."

Mort's thick lips twisted in a nasty grin. "If anybody gits, it'll be you, Joe-boy. Only we ain't letting you go, either." He jerked a thumb toward the cabin. "Inside."

Mort wore two guns and Joe wore none. Joe went toward the cabin and Buster followed.

THE CABIN door was opened by Luther Hobben, Joe's no-good cousin. Luther was tall and rangy like Joe and they were the same age—thirty-five—but Luther's mouth was hard and his dark eyes wary.

The third man was Shorty Garms—potbellied and smelling like a dirty goat. His mouth and chin receded under a clawhammer mustache and his forehead slanted back from a sharp nose.

"Howdy, cousin," Luther said heartily. "We're visiting you for a few days."

"You're riding out right now," Joe answered. Then he saw the empty rack where his rifle and shotgun had been. His gunbelt was gone from its peg.

"That's no way to greet a cousin," Luther said. "Especially since there ain't nothing you can do about it."

Joe shrugged. "Have it your way, then. I hope you brought some grub. I ain't fixed for company."

Luther turned to the others. "I told you he wouldn't make any trouble."

"He better not," Mort growled and his fingertips brushed his guns.

With a sigh, Buster dropped heavily in a corner and rested his head on his front paws. The men were in the cabin, so he accepted them, but he kept away from them.

Joe picked up the coffeepot. It was almost empty, so he rinsed it and filled it with cold water from the bucket. He ground a handful of coffeebeans and stirred them into the water. "I'll go out and look after my horse, then fix a bait of supper," he said.

"Shorty'll take care of your horse," Mort snarled. "You ain't getting out of sight."

Joe's face hardened. "I look after my own stock," he said coldly.

"Let him go," Luther advised. "Joe don't like trouble, but don't push him."

"What can he do?" Mort asked.

On his way to the corral, Joe looked back to see Mort standing in the door, hand on his gun, making

sure that Joe didn't ride down the road toward Sandrock.

"On the run, them three," Joe observed to Buster as he threw the saddle over its rack in the shed. "It's no skin off our teeth, though, long as they don't stay here too long. Let the law take care of its own business, I always say. The law and everybody else."

Joe mixed biscuits, fried salt pork and made water gravy with the fat.

Mort looked at the food with disgust. "This the way you always eat?"

"I'll cook up some beans tomorrow," Joe said, "and that's the size of it. If you don't like it, I didn't hear anybody coaxing you to stay."

"It'll be fine," Luther said. "Forget your belly, Mort, and look around. Could you find a better place? Nobody can come up that road without we see him. We can pick 'em off like that." He snapped his fingers. "An army can't get us out of here if we don't want to go."

"You talk too much," Mort growled, glaring at Joe for hearing.

"Cousin Joe won't talk," Luther said, and something in his voice made the hair prickle along the back of Joe's neck. Yet it was hard to believe that Luther would actually kill him. They had been raised together as ragged, hungry kids, then Joe had taken to hard work and single harness while Luther had hit the owlhoot trail.

AFTER SUPPER, the three visitors started a poker game without asking Joe to sit in. The cabin floor was of beaten earth, not quite smooth, so the table was unsteady. The jiggle bothered Mort, and with an annoyed curse he went to the woodbox for a stick to wedge under the table leg.

The three took the narrow bunks in the bedroom and Joe spread his bedroll on the kitchen floor. That was all right with him—he didn't like to sleep in a crowded room. Buster, curling up at his feet, didn't crowd.

The weather turned chilly and damp, and the three men stayed inside, playing cards and keeping a watch on the road across the flat. Joe suggested they could get some exercise by helping him build the barn,

but the only answer was a sneer from Mort.

As their caution relaxed, Joe guessed from scraps of their talk that they had held up the Sandrock bank and knew the sheriff wouldn't expect them to hole up right under his nose. When the law had given them time to get clear out of the country, they would ride out *behind* the pursuit. Once Joe overheard Mort say, "If that buzzard died, Shorty, it's your neck." And Shorty answered in his chipped crackling voice, "They got to take me first."

There was no objection to Joe's working at his irrigating as long as he kept in sight. As he worked, he confided to Buster, "I could make a break and turn 'em over to the sheriff, but I don't see any sense in our getting shot up over somebody else's money, do you, Buster? It's only silver. Let the law look after it."

The dog's mud-draggled tail waved a brief acknowledgement of Joe's voice.

Joe leaned on his shovel, eyeing the dog thoughtfully. "I sure don't like the way they took my guns. Mort—he's a mean cuss and that Shorty's a killer. Never says a word, hardly, but I bet he does a-plenty scheming. I don't think we'd better be around handy when they light out—because they're probably going to want to make *sure* I don't talk too much."

He moved a chunk of mud and the water trickled down through the alfalfa, glinting in the mist-dimmed sun. The alfalfa was growing fast and it looked like he'd get a crop to sell. He needed one, too. His last cent had gone to buy the valve and conduit pipe for the dam, so the water could be let out when the lake got low.

Once Luther rode with him to the dam, viewing it critically. "If that thing ever goes out, you'll be washed right into Big Bear River. Your cabin won't hardly stand up under a good heavy rain, as it is."

"If the dam did ever go, the main force of the water would miss the cabin," Joe said.

"Buying this worthless place," Luther snorted. "You always was a sucker, though. Don't you get lonesome stuck way off up here?"

Joe sniffed the air. The breeze was coming up over the fields and carried the scent of spring instead of the fetid smell of the burned timber. A mountain bluebird flew low over the creek and paused on the other side to warble a few short notes. Why would a man get lonesome when he had all outdoors around him? Winter nights when the stars were close and the fretful yapping of the coyotes rang through the frosty air— Summer when he could almost feel the life around him—

"I like to be alone," Joe said. "Buster's all the company I want."

Luther gave a short coughing laugh. "You ain't hinting for us to leave, are you?"

Joe didn't answer.

The salt pork ran out and they ate beans, biscuits and coffee for two days, then Luther and Mort announced they were going after a deer.

Joe agreed reluctantly. "I don't like hunting in the spring, but maybe one buck won't matter too much. Only be sure it is a buck."

In spite of an intermittent drizzle, Luther and Mort started before daylight, knowing they would have to ride high into the timber to the south, because the burn had killed all browse for game.

WHEN JOE came in from the wet fields that evening, the cabin was blue with smoke of frying venison. The meat was tough and dry, but filling. "Must've been a real skinny old buck," he said.

"He was skinny, all right," Luther admitted. "We dressed him out and hung him in the shed. What're you doing with all that dynamite?"

"It's left over from the dam," Joe said. "I'll get a refund when I take it back."

Shorty's eyes met Mort's across the table. Shorty's mouth puckered in an open "O" under his mustache and his tongue made a lump in his cheek, as if they shared a thought they wouldn't voice in front of Joe.

After that, the three men spent a lot of time with their heads together, arguing in low voices, making lines with their fingers on the tabletop. The way Joe read the signs, there was

going to be another robbery somewhere, but it was none of his business. All he wanted was to be left alone.

The drizzle turned to a beating rain that lasted all week. The outlaws cursed and paced the little cabin like caged cats. Luther asked uneasily, "Ain't this putting a lot of pressure on that dam?"

"It'll hold," Joe said.

"Only a fool would build a dam up there," Mort growled. "I don't think we better wait. This cabin's no stronger than a wickiup. Let's get out."

"That's right, the dam might *not* hold," Joe said quickly.

Then the next morning, the clouds split to show a washed blue sky and an apologetic sun.

"Wait another day," Luther said. "Let the mud firm up a little and we'll make better time."

They began to plan again, but Joe did not want any part of it—not even to listen to it. "I'm going to ride up the hill and spot some more logs," he said. For once, there was no objection to his riding out of sight.

It was a relief to saddle up and go slogging up the mountain away from the musty cabin where the air had become thick with dampness, smoke, grease and the goatly smell of Shorty Garms.

"One more day, Buster," Joe exulted. "Just one more day."

Buster answered with a frantic barking at a clump of brush. Riding over, Joe found the body of a fawn. He searched further and found the head and hide of a doe lying beside a stretch of black-burned grass near a ledge of rock.

Immediately and furiously, Joe knew what had happened. The doe had hidden the fawn for safety while she went for food or water, but Mort and Luther had killed her. The waiting fawn had died of starvation. Looking down at the death-swollen body of a fawn, Joe raised his fists. Although he could be pushed and pushed without fighting back, despoiling the wilderness was the push that went too far. Killing a doe in the springtime— Leaving a campfire burning— Only the rain had prevented this south side from turning into

the desolation of the east slope.

RIDING down again, his slow anger smoked and smoldered and began to blaze as his mind churned the question of how to handle the outlaws. He was making them *his* business now. He had no gun—Of course, there was the dynamite, but murder wasn't his way.

He reached the pile of logs on the creek bank and a gopher disappeared under them as Buster sprang and began to dig.

"Leave it alone," Joe said. "If them logs roll—"

He stopped abruptly. He saw the answer to his problem.

He spent the afternoon getting the logs poised just the way he wanted them—if the men in the cabin looked out, they'd only think he was getting ready to move them down to the barnyard.

Before he turned in that night, he threw a halter on his mare and hitched her in the shed. He forked hay to all the horses and pumped the trough full of fresh water. With those chores done, he knew the outlaws wouldn't bother coming near the corral.

He waited that night until all three outlaws were snoring; then, carrying his spurs to muffle the jingle, he touched Buster's nose in a signal for silence and opened the door only enough to squeeze through.

He led the mare down the mountainside road for the first couple hundred yards, edging her toward the grassy bank to avoid the clink of shod feet on stones. At a safe distance, he strapped on the spurs and swung into the saddle. Darkness and mud made the steep road hazardous, but he went as fast as he dared. At the foot of the mountain, he stopped again. Sandrock was twenty miles away, a ride of forty miles before dawn. Buster could never make it!

Joe unbuckled his saddlebags and dropped them beside the road. "Watch that, Buster. Don't let nothing touch it until I get back."

He heard the dog's whuffing breath search out the bags, then saw him, a black shadow darker than the night,

settle down to wait Joe's return. Joe spurred the mare into a lope that would cover ground without killing the animal...

Joe found the sheriff at home. The lawman came to the door barefooted and shirtless, but he had pulled on his pants and left the suspenders dangling. Yawning and stretching, he snapped instantly awake when Joe mentioned Luther, Mort and Shorty.

After Joe talked, the sheriff said, "I'll have a posse rounded up in a couple hours."

Joe said, "They been bragging how an army can't get them out of the cabin. If you don't want to take a week coming over the mountains, you have to come up the road, and they'll get you just as you top the rise."

"Maybe we can nab them when they ride out."

Joe shook his head. "They're going back in the mountains and I don't know just where they'll cross over. It could be almost anyplace. I wish I'd heard what bank they expect to blow up, then it would be easy to set a trap."

THE SHERIFF searched the floor for his socks. "I'll try to take 'em at the cabin. It's what I'm paid for."

Joe said, "When we were kids, Luther used to kill gophers by pouring water down the holes and when they come out another way, he popped them off."

The sheriff looked up questioning. "What's that got to do with anything?"

"You and your men come up and I'll have the rats out in sight for you to catch. Let me take a gun; they got mine. A good rifle would be best."

The sheriff got him a rifle and a box of shells. Then, "Hey, you're not thinking of going back up there alone?"

"Don't let your feet drag following me," Joe said. "So long!"

It was gray dark when he reached Buster and the saddlebags again, but he could smell the dawn. He forced the mare into a dead run up the last stretch of road and Buster, enjoying

it, raced alongside, barking until Joe scolded him to silence.

He rode up on the bench without trouble, but as he neared the corral, he saw a pinpoint of light through the bedroom window—someone was awake and had lighted a match. He figured it would be a few minutes before they saw his empty bed in the kitchen.

Stopping at the storage shed, he hurriedly filled the saddlebags with explosives, then rode up the mountain. He guessed the outlaws would expect trouble when they missed him, but they would fort up in the cabin instead of wasting time hunting him.

He waited until daylight at the point overlooking the cabin, and no one rode away from there. Then he went to the dam.

"We get water for breakfast, Buster," he said.

He crimped detonator caps on the fuses and set them in the dynamite and measured a long fuse by handspan to allow him ten minutes. Tying the explosives to a pole, he shoved it back into the conduit pipe under the dam, then went to the high point of the trail.

A black patch was moving along the road. That would be the posse and he knew the trio in the cabin must have spotted them. His eye gauged the place the horsemen must reach before he went into action. He didn't want them too far away, nor yet close enough to be caught if the water washed down there.

He did not let himself look at his growing fields. It was funny, you thought you didn't care about anything or anybody else, but when it came to the test...

The posse reached the spot he had set and he went to the dam. His hands were unsteady as he split the fuse and he fumbled two matches before he could light the third.

Then he whirled his horse into a belly-down run toward the pile of logs. The rope he had tied to the key log stretched along the ground. He dallied it around the saddlehorn and said, "Pull." The tired mare pulled but nothing happened.

At the sound of the blast, Buster barked furiously and the mare jumped in terror and the key log gave way and the pile rolled into Lobo Creek. The wall of white water roaring down the creek bed hit the logs, lifted and floated them, but they turned most of the force of the flood toward the cabin.

Safely above the flood with the rifle across his saddle, Joe watched the water slam against the cabin. The cabin slewed around, pivoting on one corner, then began a slow, crumbling movement toward the bench rim.

The three men came out fighting waistdeep water. A new wave hit them and one man disappeared, then came up again with flailing arms and finally righted himself. All three made it to the corral as another wave engulfed them.

The cabin was a slanting, sagging wreck when the water began to go down and the three men clung to the corral poles like bugs plastered against a window.

Joe sent one warning shot to let them know they'd better stay where they were. He was out of six-gun range.

Down on the flat, the five-man posse watched awe-stricken as the water streamed over the bench and the corner of the cabin appeared.

When the water began to subside, one man asked, "D'you think we can get up that road? It's sure washed out."

The sheriff slapped his saddlehorn. couldn't, but a horse can. We'll make it."

They heard the rifle shot and said, "Trouble," but water was still pouring down the road.

After a while, the man said, "If Joe turned them in for the reward, he sure won't be ahead much by the time he pays for the damage to his place."

The sheriff slapped his saddlehorn. "By golly, I plumb forgot to tell Joe about that reward! Well, he'll need it." He tightened the reins. "Come on, boys. We can go up now." ●END

THE TERRIBLE COWBOY

CHAPTER

1

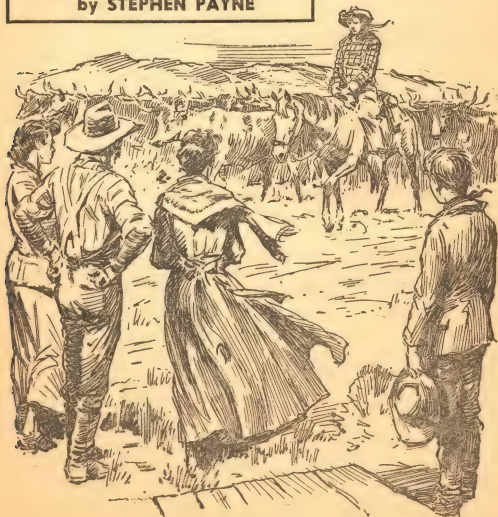
Hero

I WAS ATOP Old Baldy Hogback before noon of that never-to-be-forgotten February the second; the day the cattle and Walt

Cattlemen had burned my father's home, and they'd killed my Uncle Seth. Sure, that was ten years ago, but my folks weren't forgetting, and I knew that the only welcome they'd want to give this new cowboy would be the Winchester kind!

A BIG HEARTWARMING NOVEL

by STEPHEN PAYNE



The day Walt Larkin rode up to the E Bar marked a new life for all of us.

Larkin came to my father's E Bar farm; the day that marked the beginning of a new life for Dad, Mother, June and me...

With other kids, I'd often explored this big ridge standing west of Dad's homestead on the Wyoming plains. And the world as I knew it as a boy of thirteen was all mine to survey.

Northward, I saw the smoke plumes of trains rolling east and west, and sheep wagons, small and lonely, in the vast distances. East and south, grassy plains ran away to meet far horizons, expanses as level as Mother's pancake griddle, spotted with other stretches that were cut by small alkali-encrusted ponds, shallow valleys and treeless hills. This was a dry land, free of sagebrush, and swept bare of snow by relentless winds; a land of spider-legged windmills, crisscrossed by barbed wire fences, and widely scattered sets of buildings.

The white frame schoolhouse stood like a landmark near the highway leading from Bixton to the mountains; mountains standing aloof against the western skyline, massive, pine-clad shoulders blue-green throughout the year, though even in mid-summer the far-off higher peaks shimmered whitely.

We could see the mountains from our yard, too, and I recalled how June would gaze toward them with longing eyes and wistfully say, "I don't really like wind and dust, nor vile alkali water, nor a dairy farm, but I know I'd love those mountains, if only—" At that point, June's voice would always fade away.

We dry farmers of the plains had nothing in common with cowmen, and in the mountains big cowmen grazed their thousands of beef cattle. Every autumn their beef herds trailed past our schoolhouse, enroute to the shipping pens at Bixton. Chuck wagons, horse cavvies, cattle and cowboys, all fascinated me. Here was something big and exciting, colorful, and so completely romantic that I was filled with strange desires and yearnings. Forgetting how I'd been told over and over that cowboys and cowmen were all tricky, greedy, ruthless and wicked, I'd nev-

ertheless whisper, "Oh, to be a cowboy!"

But I'd never dared to mention this to Mother or Dad, or to Sam Downs, our closest neighbor on the east, who was going all-out to convince June she must stop teaching summer school and become a farmer's wife. His wife.

Today, February the second, however, I'd been counting off the days, seven of them, since Tom Graham, owner of the T G outfit, had come to Father's farm, and said they were having a hard winter in the mountains. He and others were desperately short of hay, but he had heard in Bixton that Mr. Eastman had a big pasture which might rough a herd through until May.

Neither Dad nor Mother liked dealing with a cowman, but here was a chance to make money out of what had so far proved a worthless investment. So Dad had shown Mr. Graham the grazing land and Graham had then given him a two-thousand-dollar check for a three-month lease on the pasture.

I WAS HOT and cold with excitement, thinking this a real miracle. I believe June felt much the same, and I'll always remember Dad and Mother staring unbelievably at the check and Mr. Graham's saying, "About fifteen hundred young steers 'll be here February second. I'll leave one cowboy to ride herd. You folks can board this rider and feed his saddle horses? I'll pay whatever's right for the accommodation."

Followed a moment of tight, tight silence, Dad's and Mother's eyes meeting; Mother's face turning a little bit white. But as Dad fluttered the check, she said low, "All right, Mr. Graham."

From this land's west boundary, the hogback, it spread out below me, a stretch two miles wide and four miles long, extending eastward to Mel Stonehouse's farm. Dad's own homestead lying south of Mel's, with a low hill definitely separating the two farms, didn't actually touch the great pasture. Yet by one means and another Dad had acquired title to all of this block, causing Mel Stone-

house to jeer that Harry Eastman was a land-poor dreamer. "You'll never make a dollar off it, and it'll eventually be sold for taxes."

In all probability Mel would have been right if this cattle deal had not come up to save my father. We were so desperately hard up it had taken June's entire salary to provide this winter's grub supply. Mel Stonehouse, however, because he had quite early filed on the water which came form the springs rising on our land and used it to irrigate his hay meadows, had the best farm in the neighborhood. From the hogback summit I could see his buildings and stacks and were for that reason obliged to buy hay from him. Our neighbor Sam Downs was in the same fix.

Thinking how all-wise and overbearing Mel was, and how he bossed our tight little group of dry farmers, I felt helpless anger against both my father and Mel. If only Dad'd stand up to him and tell him off!

In the next moment, however, I forgot Mel Stonehouse, for as I looked southward once again, I saw coming—the cattle! It was obvious they had been travelling the main road from the mountains toward Bixton, but had now turned and were pointing north. Like a stream, they were gently flowing across the wide open plain, a dark river at least one mile long. At point was a lone rider, behind him along the swing rode another cowboy, and then another, and finally through the dust that shrouded the drag, I glimpsed a fourth man and a few head of loose horses.

THRILLED from ears to toes, I rode down from Old Baldy at a reckless pace to meet the herd and the cowboy on point, who, to my joyful satisfaction, was young, his weather-darkened face clean-shaven. Black cowhide chaps, with patches of the hair worn off, showed hard wear; lightweight overshoes neatly fitted his boots; a big white hat, a checkered green and blue Mackinaw over a red sweater, and heavy gauntlet gloves, completed his attire.

When he said, "Hello, Button," his friendly grey-blue eyes and his

pleasant grin got right into me. "We must be close to the E Bar ranch. Have you come to pilot us in?"

"Sure," I stammered. "I'm Bob Eastman... This is Tom Graham's T G outfit?"

He nodded. "That's right. I'm Walt Larkin," holding out his hand. I shook it, feeling great yet sort of wicked, too, and he went on, "I'll be putting up with you folks for a spell, Bob. Reckon we'll hit it off fine, young fellow."

I choked, thinking, *I hope so! But he don't know how my folks and our neighbors feel about cowboys.*

However, today I was a cowboy myself, riding with Walt and helping him. I'd rather expected the steers to be gaunt and thin, but they were almost fat enough for beef, heavy-bodied yearlings and two-year-olds with shaggy red coats and "brockle-faces"—faces spotted red and white, showing a cross between the Herefords and Shorthorns—and all had been dehorned so neatly they looked like natural muleys.

Soon we were passing Dad's homestead on our right and climbing the hill running east and west which, shutting off a view of Mel's farm, fixed it so we didn't have to look at his meadow and hay stacks every day and think how much better off he was than us. Atop this low rise was the pasture gate. I opened it and had climbed on my pony again when Walt said, "Help me count 'em, Bob?"

Was that something! Other cowboys kept the cattle pouring through the gate so fast they were often eight or ten abreast. I lost count in a few minutes, and just watched Walt, who never seemed to lose his count. He held the loose end of his saddle rope in both hands and every few minutes he tied a knot in it without once taking his eyes off the cattle.

When at last—it seemed a long time—all the steers and three loose horses, one carrying a pack, were inside the pasture and eating the old brown grass, I became aware that more cowboys had drawn up near us.

"How many, Walt?" one asked.

He tallied the knots in his rope,

and, catching on to why he had tied them, I counted fourteen.

"Fourteen hundred and seventy-nine," Walt said, his nimble fingers untying the knots. "And in spite of our care, I spotted four strays."

"What are strays?" I demanded, not realizing I was showing how green I was to cowboy work.

The men chuckled and Walt said, "Cattle carrying other brands than our T G... Well, that's it, boys. Head back."

I hadn't been able to see the T G on most of the steers, yet Walt had spotted four that had other brands!

"They're all yours, Walt," said the oldest man. "Are you lucky to get out of that blame snow hole! So long and good luck."

Cowboys trailing beef herds to Bixton had horse cavvies and chuck wagons as well as the cattle, so as the three took the back trail, I asked, "Where are their extra horses?"

"Where we put up last night," explained Walt. "But I brought my bed and warsack along, as well as extra horses."

Eyes scanning the big pasture, he went on, "Is the fence all up in good shape, Bob? Will I have to chop ice to open water holes?"

"No," I said. "The springs are warm, so the water doesn't freeze right away. The fence? Dad has checked all of it since Mr. Graham was here... I was sure s'prised any cowman could be so—so pleasant and really swell as your boss!"

Walt's eyes opened wide. He had a short, rough-hewn face with snubby nose and sandy hair. I decided his parents must have been Irish, and it seemed to me that his personality and crinkly smile would make anybody like him at sight. Yet there was something I felt I must tell him, although I was afraid it might not be exactly right of me either.

"Why were you surprised a cowman should be a swell fellow, Bob?" he asked.

"Because I've heard over and over that cowmen are—" I paused, and made a fresh start. "Walt, my folks and everybody around here hates cattlemen and cowboys." There I'd gotten it out.

CHAPTER

2

Hard Deal

HE LOOKED at me with startled, quizzical disbelief. "Shucks, the fights between settlers and cowmen ended ten years ago."

"Well, it was ten years ago and in another state that my father's home was burned and he was forced to load his wagon and pull out. I was too little to understand what was happening, but June—my big sis—wasn't. Still, maybe Mother, Dad and June wouldn't be so terrible bitter if cowmen hadn't on that same raid killed my Uncle Seth, one of my mother's brothers. Several of our neighbors once got a hard deal from cow people, too."

The cowboy's smile had changed to a stern grimace. "So that's the set-up," he said thoughtfully. "Thanks, Bob. I'll watch my step, for old feuds can be fanned to life so darned easy... You, yourself, don't really hate cattle people?"

"Gosh, no," I said, and watched his crinkly smile come back. "I've—I've even thought of running away to be a cowboy."

I hoped Walt would approve of that idea. But with his eyes screwed half-shut, he shook his head and asked abruptly, "Is that your farm where I see all those haystacks?"

"No. That's Mel Stonehouse's place. And you got to know half of this east boundary fence belongs to him. But will he keep it up? No!"

"Uckoo," said Walt, digging a short black pipe from a pocket and filling it with tobacco from a long sack and lighting it. "How'd your father get this big piece of land, Bob?"

"Well, my father's an impractical dreamer with visions," I said, quoting old John Maxfield, one of our neighbors. "For all the eight years we've been here he's been buying and trading for land claiming that either raising winter wheat or resale of the land, or both, would make us rich. And he did have some money when he came."

"Doesn't sound impractical to me," said Walt. "How about this winter wheat?"

"Aw, heck," I scoffed. "Maybe a good thing Dad's never been able to plant more than ten acres of it. Wind blows the seed and soil to the Gulf of Mexico or some place about that far. Besides, 'though folks do raise some barley for chickens and pigs, this country's too high, too cold and too gosh-awful dry to raise anything without irrigation. A windmill won't irrigate more than enough ground for a garden and a fellow works to do that much."

"Even so, this pasture land may yet make your father rich," Walt commented thoughtfully. "Didn't about half of this acre once belong to the railroad?"

"Every other section. Four altogether, and my father bought them for five hundred dollars. Then homesteaders, dozens of them, plain starved out on the other pieces of land that make up this big block. I remember Dad trading one a rickety old wagon for his claim, a bull calf to another one, and fifty pounds of butter to another. Sometimes they'd hold out for cash, and one way and another Dad'd scrape up enough money to buy a claim."

WITH HIS crinkly smile, Walt was listening to me as if he was really interested. "Your father's a regular Yankee trader," he remarked.

"Yes, he is a Yankee. Mother's from New England, too. But I don't think a Yankee trader's such a much, 'cause if Mr. Graham hadn't come and bought this pasture, we'd have been— O-o-oh, here comes Mel."

Walt said low and fast, "You're afraid of him. Why?"

I didn't answer for Mel Stonehouse was stopping his sway-backed old brown work plug, which he always rode with a blind bridle, near us. Because of the way Mel bounced in his saddle, his overalls had rolled up his thick legs, and his socks had rolled down over his ankles. His coat was open and he was puffing out his barrel chest as if angry. An aggressive, positive man who always spoke in a

deep rough bass, he boomed belligerently,

"What the hell's coming off here? Where'd these cattle come from?"

I said, all in one breath, "Dad's sold this grass to the T G outfit. This is Walt Larkin who's going to ride herd on the cattle."

"Huh? Why wasn't I told about it?"

"Should you have been?" Walt asked mildly. He was smiling faintly as if amused.

"Yes," said Mel. "I've warned Harry Eastman that if we let just one stinking cowman get a toe-hold here it'd be the end for us farmers."

Walt's smile vanished. He said, "Come May we'll move this herd back home. You'll have no trouble with us."

"Sez you!" Mel retorted. "Sure as shootin' the blasted scrubs'll break into my field and into my haystacks. See you keep 'em out, feller, 'cause I'm warnin' you I'll demand damages... Now I'll go see Harry Eastman and tell him a thing or six."

He turned left through the gate and kicked his plug into a lope.

Walt looked at me. "Your neighbor's a real pleasant gentleman. Does he boss your father, Bob?"

"Pretty much," I said with disgust. "In town, or at any meeting, he's always popping off, telling what a wise bird he is and what his neighbors should do."

"I get it," Walt said. "Let's look at the water holes."

I rode with him along the wide swale where water from dozens of small springs drained into one main channel. Ice had formed in places, yet there were plenty of open water holes for all of the cattle. Satisfied of this, Walt was at last ready to go to my home.

As we shoved his three extra horses into the yard between log house, stable and feed lot corral, I was sweating with uneasiness knowing that my taking up with a cowboy wasn't going to please the family. However, only Dad was in sight, a milk pail in his hand. A small-framed, wiry man, drawn down lean and hard from work, he had a black

mustache and mild brown eyes under heavy brows and heavier thatch of black hair.

HE SCOWLED at me then rearranged his features quickly and nodded affably to Walt. "You're the T G rider, eh? Put your bed in yon bunkhouse," pointing to an eight by ten frame shack with one tiny window, a rickety door and no stove. "Turn your horses in the feed lot with my stock."

"Yes, sir," said Walt, stepping from his saddle. "I'm Walt Larkin. You're Harry Eastman, I take it," holding out his hand.

My father pretended he did not see Walt's gesture. "Supper at six," he said, and turned quickly into the stable. For a moment Walt stood and looked at his hand as if he'd been slapped. Then he hunched a shoulder, put his rope on his pack horse and led it to that awful bunkhouse, with me trailing along, not knowing what to say or do. But when I pushed open the sagging door I saw that either Mother or June had cleaned the room, put a mattress on the wooden bunk and supplied a wash basin, a clean towel, a bucket for water and a dipper.

Without speaking, Walt loosened the pack and lugged it inside. He put his horses in the feed lot where we had a windmill, a water tank and a hay crib for our stock. There was another windmill behind the house and a garden-plot.

I unsaddled my pony and was trailing the cowboy to the bunkhouse when Mother's voice stopped me. "Bob! The wood box is empty."

I knew better than to ignore the summons. When at length I carried an armload of stove wood into the kitchen, she said reproachfully, "What have you been doing?"

I stood back and sized her up. Not tall, she had grown a little bit plump, but her figure was still something to make the neighbors at a dance take notice, and if her hair hadn't turned grey prematurely—possibly due to shock and to a hard life—she'd have been almost stunning. I reckon she was anyhow and just the nicest mother any fellow had, only—well,

we couldn't always see things the same way.

"Somebody had to show the T G cowboys where the field was and help 'em put the cattle in it," I said.

"Yes," she admitted. "But you didn't ask permission to do it, son."

"I was scared to," I said, and whipped out of the room to get more fire wood.

Supper was the strangest meal I'd ever eaten. Mother and June stayed in the living room. Dad, Walt and I sat at the table in a sort of tense, uneasy, unfriendly silence. The food was good—roast pork, plus potatoes and turnips which Mother had raised, bread and also butter which she had made, plenty of cream and milk, and the treat of a fresh apple pie.

Once I caught June opening the door to the living room on a crack. Walt noticed it, too, and I saw an interested light flash in his eyes.

Phooey, I thought, Walt mustn't fall for any girl. Yet I knew that to grown-up young men June was an eyeful. Taller than either mother or dad, she had soft, crow-wing black hair and wonderfully expressive dark eyes. In spite of growing up on a farm, she had grace and poise and a fairly good education, too. Even to me, June was somebody special, and Sam Downs believed the sun rose and set in her.

WE HAD reached dessert before at last Walt tried to start a conversation with Dad. "I met your neighbor, Mr. Stonehouse, this afternoon," he said.

"U'm," mumbled Dad, without raising his eyes.

"The man implied," went on Walt, "that he'd given you the dickens for selling his pasture."

Dad said, "He did?"

I thought the talk was going to die there, so I burst out, "No skin off his nose! Dad, when you going to get your back up and tell Mell off when he comes around bullying you?"

That brought Dad's eyes up and an angry flush into his face. "Enough out of you, son... Mr. Larkin, I'll appreciate it if you don't give this boy any cowboy notions, or teach him bad habits."

Walt dropped his fork. For a moment he just looked at Dad, then he picked up the fork and resumed eating. Soon thereafter he took his hat and coat and went out to the bunkhouse. I squared my jaw and started to follow, but Dad stopped me at the door. Mother and June appeared at the same moment, Mother saying, "Get this once and for all, Bob. You're not to spend evenings with that cowboy. You're to stay away from him as much as is possible under these strange conditions."

When I got up the next morning, the cowboy was gone. While helping Dad with the chores, I asked, "Walt hasn't just left us cold, has he?" Bolstering my courage, I went on fiercely, "Wouldn't blame him if he did pull out, the welcome he's getting here, and that cold bunkhouse!"

"What else could he expect?" Dad returned curtly. "For your own good, son, don't make a hero of any cowboy, understand?"

Fidgeting uncomfortably I changed the subject. "What'd Mel say to you yesterday?"

Dad pulled his shoulders together and tugged at one end of his mustache. "Told me I was a traitor to my neighbors, letting a cowman get a hold in our community. Said he'd call a meeting to discuss what must be done about it. He also did a lot of belly-aching about the cattle drinking all his water and polluting what's left."

"Can he stop the cattle from drinking the water?" I asked, badly scared at this possibility.

"Don't see how he possibly can," Dad said, and our talk died.

Walt came home toward noon. Again he, Dad and I ate alone at the table, and I wondered disgustedly, How long will Mother and June keep up this foolishness?

Walt said to Dad, "I pushed the cattle toward the hogback end of the pasture, and tried to patch up the fence between Stonehouse's land and yours. But it's so far gone, patching won't help. It's his half of the fence that's bad?"

"Yes," said Dad. "I can't persuade him to rebuild it."

"Maybe I can," Walt remarked,

grinning mischievously.

Dad came half out of his chair. "Don't do anything to provoke Mel Stonehouse!" he ordered curtly.

"The fellow's itching for a good fight, and I'm Irish," the cowboy retorted.

Dad sort of hunched up at this, growling, "Well, keep your Irish under control."

I thought Walt would blow up. Instead he relaxed and said quietly, "Okay, Mr. Eastman... I'm going to town. Any little thing I can bring you folks?"

"No!" Dad was still ungracious. "Sam Downs takes our butter into town each week, and hauls back anything we must have."

"I see," Walt pushed back his chair and went out.

Not daring to follow him, I nevertheless saw through a window that he was leading his pack horse, our old pack saddle on its back with several gunnysacks tied to it, as he rode away in the wind.

Why's he going to Bixton? I wondered, and Mother, who had now come into the kitchen, answered that silent question:

"I suppose the man is going to get drunk, like all rowdy cowboys do when they go to town.... I was listening just now, Harry. He's a combative fellow, sure to get into a nasty fight. He'll bring whisky back here with him, too. What'll we do?"

"Nothing, Ethel," said Dad. "Cross that bridge when we come to it. Come, son, let's go to work."

CHAPTER

3

Menace

WORK THAT afternoon was hauling a load of hay from Mel's farm. To an old iron-wheeled hayrack wagon, we hitched Prince and Sadie, our black Percheron mare that we all thought as much of as if she was human. She reminded me of Black Beauty in the book I'd read last summer at school, but she was now heavy with foal and wasn't as beautiful as the real Black Beauty.

Dad let me drive, and we went up over the hill and to our stack of hay in Mel's meadow. We used one load

about every three days and when this stack was gone we'd have to buy another one from Mel. His cattle were scrubby milk stock of badly mixed breeds. Mel kept the cows giving milk in his feed lot, and put some others that were nearly starved to death in with them. But the main herd ran in his meadow, and instead of really feeding them, he did what the neighbors called "shaking a pitchfork at 'em"—meaning, doling out half the amount of hay they should have had. All the grass in his field was grubbed into the ground, and today Mel's cattle were in our pasture, close to the line fence, while the T G steers were far up toward the hog-back.

"Look, Dad," I cried. "Mel's cattle are eating our grass. Not the first time either."

This sort of thing always burned me, but Dad never did anything about it. Today he merely said, "Oh, well, there's not much we can do about it."

Suddenly I was so mad I wanted to fight somebody. "You'll take anything off Mel," I blurted. Though I knew I was taking a long chance of being turned over Dad's knee and soundly paddled.

When he didn't answer, and went on pitching hay as if he hadn't heard me, I thought rebelliously, "Come spring, I'll run away... My dad—" I felt tears start in my eyes—"just don't measure up."

Like most kids, I was hard to get up in the morning, yet that next morning, I came awake at daybreak worrying about Walt. Had he come home? Had he been in a fight and was he drunk? I peeked out my window. A skiff of snow had fallen, but the clouds were breaking and as yet there was no wind. I saw Walt busy about something up on the roof of that sorry bunkhouse. Then I saw him slide down and go inside, and a minute later a stove pipe came up through the roof.

In no time, I had my clothes on, and since neither Mother, Dad nor June appeared to stop me, I raced to the bunkhouse. There, Walt had set up a small, brand new box stove and I saw that he'd made a hole in the roof and had put a sheet of tin over

it so the hot pipe wouldn't catch the roof on fire.

"Hi, Bob?" he sang out. "Surely glad to see you. I've been as lonesome as a shepherd without a dog or a sheep for company... Like my stove?"

"Yes," I was looking hard at him to see if he acted drunk, and then glancing around to see if he had a bottle of whisky. No bottle, nothing but a package on his bed which could be a box of candy. From a pocket of his mackinaw he brought out another small package. "New rubber for your sling shot, Bob... I'll get some wood. Can you find me an old kerosene can I can cut the top out of for a hot water reservoir?"

"Sure, Walt... A rubber for my sling shot? Thanks!... Have a good time in town?"

"No. It was strictly business... Take that box of candy and see if your mother and sister will accept it."

AS WALT went to rustle an armload of wood, I took the candy to the house. All the family were now up and all were looking into the yard. "Present for you from Walt," I said to Mother and June.

June reached as if to take the package. Mother stopped her with a gesture. "Take it right back to him, son," she said. "And I've told you to keep away from his bunkhouse."

I tightened up all over. "All right, Mother. But he fooled you. Ho-ho! He ain't drunk, ain't got—"

"Isn't," corrected June.

"—whisky, and hasn't been in a fight. He brought home a little stove and I want an empty five-gallon oil can for a water heater."

June found the can for me, and because I wasn't much good with a can opener she cut its top out, and said, sort of privately, "I've felt badly about his having no heat when there's this awful cold and wind, so I'm glad he bought a stove... You're sure he hasn't been drinking?"

"Well, you smell his breath when he comes in for breakfast," I said impertinently.

"I won't get that close to him—or

to any cowboy," June answered positively.

When I returned the candy to Walt, he drew a long breath and held it a minute before he merely put the box away.

The days ran along, one much like another, cold and windy. Awful windy. Sam Downs called on June, but he and Walt did not meet one another. Mother and Dad kept close watch on me so I'd not have much chance to be with Walt, and the strained situation continued. How long will it go on? I worried. And how will it be ended?

Hearing nothing alarming about Mel nor anything directly from him was a relief. Walt reported once to Dad that he'd put Mel's cattle back into Mel's field and patched the fence, but that it would do no good.

Then came an evening which broke the routine if nothing more. Sam Downs with his team and rig had called quite early to see June, and the other two of them were taking a walk when Walt loped home from the pasture and met them face to face.

I was chore-ing at the barn, too far away to hear what was said, but as Walt rode in I saw there was no humor in his eyes and that his wind-bitten face had closed up. "Lo, Bob." For once he was short and bitey with me, probably due to the long strain of feeling unwanted even when he knew how I felt about him. "You going to the dance at Maxfield's?" he added.

"Dance? Where you hear about it? Say, you and me'll go."

"Count me out," almost snappishly. "When I just now met your sister and Mr. Samuel Downs, I forced an introduction and then said, 'Nice to see another young man. Perhaps the three of us can have a card game this evening.' Sam answered, short and gruff, 'This evening I'm taking Miss Eastman to the dance at Maxfield's, but no cowboys are invited.'... A fellow'd think I had horns and a forked tail."

I felt as if I too had been slapped down hard. I really loved the country dances where I had a chance to get together with other boys and stuff myself with sandwiches, home-

made cake and ice cream. But if Walt wasn't welcome, I'd not go either.

RIGHT AFTER supper, Sam drove out with June, but Dad and Mother decided they'd not go to this dance. Eavesdropping, I learned the reason for this decision.

"Why shouldn't we go, Harry?" Mother asked.

"Darn it all, Ethel, Mel hasn't gotten the neighbors together yet to tell them what should be done about me and these T G cattle... Most of the men will be at this dance. Mel's sure to make his talk, and I just don't want to be there."

I thought fiercely, my father's ducking. Afraid to face up to Mel, and, darn it, Mel's sure to turn all the neighbors against us... If only my dad— But he won't—ever.

That next day, after Sam had brought June home and had gone to his own farm, and Walt had as usual ridden to the pasture, three of our neighbors called, Old John Maxfield, Fred Goodhue and Will Mason. All were pretty well along in years, and ordinarily I thought of them as swell neighbors for whom a kid should have a lot of respect. They caught Dad and me in front of the stable, and after sort of stiff greetings, Maxfield cleared his throat.

"Eastman," he began, "we're worked up about this cattle deal. Mel Stonehouse said—"

"There's no call for you fellows to be so worked up," Dad interrupted sharply.

The three shifted uncomfortably in their saddles, but the stern and grim expressions did not leave their grizzled faces.

"We think there is," Maxfield returned crisply. "Mel said—"

"Mel said! 'Mel said!' I piped up. 'Why do grownups like you always listen to what Mel says?'"

I got three startled and disapproving looks, and Dad turned on me savagely. "Another word out of you, son, and I'll—" he left it hanging, but I knew just what he meant.

"Well, just what did Mel say?" he demanded.

"That you'd made a serious mistake in letting those cattle get a hold here, Harry," Maxfield snapped. "We be-

lieve you realize it, however, and will do—"

"They're on my land and aren't troubling anybody else," Dad pointed out heatedly.

"Maybe," said Maxfield. "But come spring, when this T G outfit's lease expires, they'll just dump the herd on the small bit of open range we've got left. The critters will break into our fields, eat up all of our scanty crops. There'll be hell to pay," Maxfield finished.

"Mr. Graham said he'd trail the steers home as soon as his lease is up," Dad said. "And I believe him... Neighbors, you haven't a thing to worry about."

"Mel says we've got plenty to worry about," Maxfield retorted in an angry tone. "And we believe Mel. Eastman, if you want to stay on the right side with all of us, you'll get rid of the cattle and of that darned cowpuncher. Right now."

I watched Dad, hoping he'd bristle and tell them to go jump in the lake. Instead he just sort of wilted, saying, "Losing the friendship and respect of my good neighbors is the last thing I want to happen. But be reasonable, I can't order the cattle and the cow-boy out of here before May first."

"Got a written contract with this man Graham?" Goodhue demanded suddenly.

"No," Dad said, "just a verbal agreement."

"Okay, then," Goodhue snapped. "That cowman can't show a contract. Serve notice on him to move his stock."

"You'd have me break my word?" Dad asked.

The men shrugged and glanced sort of sheepishly at one another. Maxfield answered, "Under the circumstances, and since Mel says this herd is such a menace, yes... Get busy, Eastman... Good day."

CHAPTER

4

"Stays With The Herd"

THE THREE rode away, Dad staring after them as if he'd been slapped until he was groggy. I started to speak, and then suddenly changed my mind as June came running from the house.

"What's wrong, Dad?"

"Nothing," he said, very short and cross, and he ducked into the stable.

With a combative flash in her eyes, June grabbed me before I, too, could duck. "What's this all about, Bob?"

"Mel says," I twisted my face into a scornful knot, "the T G cattle are a menace. Unless we get rid of them and Walt right away the neighbors'll hate us."

"Neighbors'll hate us?" June repeated. "Hate us?"... So this is some more of Mel's spite work and trouble making. There are times when I wish that man'd get what's coming to him... Oh, well, cheer up, Bob. Nothing really bad will happen."

And nothing bad did happen, at least not right away.

One evening Walt asked for the use of a laundry tub, saying he needed a bath. The following morning, he had shirts and underwear and socks hanging out to dry, and come Saturday night, Mother did not have her usual argument with me over my taking a bath.

Surprised, she asked, "What's come over you, Bob?" I answered in one word, "Walt."

"I don't understand," she said.

"Walt keeps himself looking real neat and clean, and now he's got a stove and can heat water, he shaves every morning. Since he likes to look nice and be clean, I—well—well, I—" I stopped, noticing how startled and worried Mother looked.

Later I overheard her saying to June, "Bob's copying that cowboy. What can we do?" And June answered, "Strange as it may seem, Bob is learning things that won't hurt him at all."

Cold, windy days followed one another, and then March came in like a lion, with the worst blizzard of the winter. Except for doing the most necessary chores, it kept Dad and me as well as Mother and June indoors. But all day long, Walt was out in that storm, riding herd on the T G steers. His horse was worn out when at last he came in for supper and tied a fresh mount in the barn before he ate.

At the table Dad asked him how the

cattle were faring. He replied, "All right. But a barbed wire fence is darned poor shelter, and I'm trying to stop 'em from drifting ahead of the storm."

"Drifting?" I asked.

"Meaning they'll bunch up and travel with the storm. Not fast, but just keep walking. Very few wire fences will stop 'em. Nothing but some natural barrier."

Walt listened to the swirl of storm and the wind which was almost shaking even our log house. Then with a shrug, he said, "Even a coyote can hunt his hole and keep warm on a night like this, but a cowpuncher's got to sit in his saddle and take it... Don't ever take up cowpunching, Bob." He pushed back his chair and went out.

June joined me at a window from which we saw Walt riding away into the darkness and the storm. "Wish I could help him," I whispered, and when June pressed my hand I noticed she was uneasy would-up, tense. We were snug and warm in the old log house, but listening to the swirl of snow and shriek of the wind, perhaps she felt somewhat as I did.

WE TRIED to play checkers. Our minds weren't on the game, and neither Mother nor Dad could seem to settle to anything. Dad got up and prowled around the rooms, staring out the windows, then said to Mother, "I ought to go help that cowboy."

She said in a frightened tone, "No. I won't let you go out on such a terrible night... After all, it's his responsibility."

"I s'pose so... Let's go to bed. All of us."

"Bob and I'll finish this game," June said.

But we didn't finish, for she upset the checkerboard, she was that jumpy. As we gathered up the spilled checkers she said low, "His responsibility?... Bob, at last I know what that old saying we've heard about cowboys really means. The saying that a real one 'stays with the herd.' Well, let's try to sleep."

I didn't think I'd sleep—thinking of Walt and the cattle in that awful storm. But I guess nothing short of

an earthquake will keep a thirteen-year-old boy awake for long. Early though I turned out the next morning, June was ahead of me at the sorry little bunkhouse where snow had sifted through a dozen cracks and made small drifts. She was doing what I'd thought of doing—making a fire in Walt's stove and filling his hot water can.

"It's queer you'd do this," I said.

She was sweeping out the snow, and didn't answer. Then I saw her looking at a new bridle hanging on the wall. It was made of different colors of hairs from horses' manes and tails, braided and twisted together, and was almost finished. "So that's how he puts in his evenings," June said.

"Sure is a swell job," I approved. "Look! He reads, too. These books on this cracker box table."

"Oh?" murmured June. "Here's 'Common Diseases of Horses and Cattle and How to Treat Them.' She opened the heavy book and read, "'Property of Walt Larkin... State Agricultural College.'... Bob, can this cowboy really have gone to college?"

"It's possible," I said, grinning mischievously at my sister. "Some-day you and Mother—Dad too—will learn that all cowboys and cowmen ain't—"

"Aren't," said June.

"—Aren't what you think they are, and the sooner—"

"Go get more wood and a bucket of water, Bob," June interrupted me.

Toward eight o'clock, the blizzard had blown itself out, and the sun was shining when at last Walt came home. His horse was on its last legs, so tired that for half an hour it stood in one spot, head hanging low. That was the day June put breakfast on the table for Walt, and hovered around to refill his coffee cup.

AS USUAL, the wind and the sun soon removed the snow, and then came a day when Walt and I were looking at Dad's cattle and horses in the feed lot. "What about that brown gelding?" he asked abruptly. "Isn't he broke to ride or drive?"

"No," I said. "June bought Brownie last spring, expecting to have a horse

she can ride. Way it is now she drives one old plug to a cart to school... Sam Downs tried to break this horse. But after three hard spills, he gave up."

"So?" Walt's face lighted with interest. He smiled that crinkly sort of smile that made me like him so darned much. "You suppose your folks'll let me break this cayuse, Bob?"

"Darn, I don't know. They seem scared to have you do anything at all for 'em. Why is it, Walt? Why?"

"Because, Bob, they don't want to feel obligated to any cowhand. Say...your dad's gone to Mel's place for a load of hay, June went with him, and your mother's taking a nap. Let's—" He darted into the stable and came back with his rope.

Brownie was the most important, cockiest horse that ever strutted on four legs. When Walt's loop closed around his neck, he snorted and pawed. But he was halter-broken, and the next thing he knew Walt had slipped a "Scotch hobble" on him and drawn one hind foot up off the ground so he could not use it.

When at length Brownie quieted down Walt saddled him and fixed his reins to a hackamore on the pony's head. Eventually he took off the hobble and swung to saddle, just as Dad and June pulled in with a load of hay.

Brownie took three or four tentative steps, discovered he had use of all his legs, and with a wild squeal went up in the air and came down pitching. He rammed into the cows and other horses and he filled that feed lot with a crazy-mad bucking horse.

Once he lost his feet and fell hard, and I heard June scream. Walt was in the clear however, and he was back in the saddle when Brownie got going again. At last, completely winded, Brownie stopped, and stood rolling his eyes at that man on his back as if he couldn't believe he'd been ridden—and beaten.

Dad was pitching hay into the feed crib with a harsh and troubled look on his face. But June's eyes were bright, and when Walt reined up near the hayrack she said, "You've done

something I've wanted and was afraid nobody could do for me. How soon can I ride Brownie?"

I saw their eyes meet, and I saw Walt's friendly smile sort of get into my sister. He said, "With your permission, I'll ride this horse on my work for four-five days straight. That'll take the kinks out of him and make him safe for a lady."

"How wonderful!" June cried. "I've so much wanted to ride Brownie. Thank you, Walt."

"How much'll you charge us?" Dad demanded gruffly.

"Nothing," said Walt.

"I insist on paying you for breaking the horse."

Walt looked hard at my father. Their eyes locked and duelled, but Dad's were the first to waver. He forked hay savagely. I caught on there was something going on here he did not like, and it wasn't Walt's breaking the horse or yet that he refused to be paid for it.

CHAPTER

5

"Like All Wild Cowboys"

THREE DAYS later, Sam Downs saw Walt riding in on Brownie, and seemed to get his neck bowed, too. "What's the meaning of that?" he asked June, his voice sharp-edged.

She laughed and replied, "Just that Walt is merely breaking Brownie for me, so relax."

Sam, a husky and solid chunk of young farmer, didn't exactly relax. Later, I saw him and Dad and Mother putting their heads together, but what they said I could not get close enough to hear.

On March the fifteenth, Dad came home from Mel's with a jag of hay. as he told Mother, June and me, "Sadie slipped and fell hard on a patch of ice in Mel's field and I'm afraid she's going to lose her colt."

With all of us thinking as much of Sadie as if she were one of the family, this was real tragedy. I was jittery with fear as I helped unhitch poor Sadie and put her in the stable. But the mare wouldn't eat or drink, and it was plain she was suffering terribly. Realizing what was wrong, Dad told me, "I'm afraid the colt is

already dead and that she simply can't deliver it... No veterinarian at Bixton... What'll we—? Go get Mel, son. He knows more about such things than anybody hereabouts."

I didn't want to ask Mel Stonehouse for any favor, but this was the sort of appeal scarcely any neighbor could refuse, so Mel loped home with me. He had his look at Sadie, made an examination, and said, "Colt's twisted inside the mare, Harry. No possible chance of doing one damn thing to help. You're going to lose Sadie, so just as well take her out and shoot her."

I glared at Mel and Dad turned white, his hands were shaking. "You might try to do something, Mel," he said.

"I've said it was no use." Mel climbed on his brown plug and went home.

Dad reported the bad news to June and Mother, and all of us were feeling low and desperate when Walt loped home from the pasture. Dad called his attention to Sadie, saying glumly, "Mel Stonehouse has been here. He said nothing can be done and we might as well shoot the mare."

"Shoot her?" said Walt, giving Sadie his thoughtful attention while I wriggled from one foot to the other, my heart choking my throat. Then my heart leaped as Walt went on, "Hell, no, Mr. Eastman. Let's do all we can to save her... Bob, get a big pan of hot water. Rags and soap, too, so I can wash up." He jerked off his chaps, coat and sweater and rolled up his sleeves.

Dad got a couple of lanterns and helped all he could, but it was Walt who did the veterinary work and three hours later he had won the hard fight. Sadie's colt was born dead, but the mare herself was nibbling at a bran mash I fixed, and Walt, soaked with sweat, was tottering on his feet.

"I don't know how to thank you," Dad said gratefully. "You're a wonder."

"Shucks," Walt said, "any good cowpuncher has to be a fair to middling veterinarian. I studied this subject at the Agricultural College."

"You—you went to College?" Dad asked.

"For a couple of winters," Walt informed nonchalantly, and turned away.

THE NEXT morning Sadie was doing all right and for the first time—the very first—Mother and June ate breakfast with the men—including Walt Larkin. Nor was this all. That afternoon after Walt had come home from the big pasture, he saddled Brownie for June and the two rode away together.

Sam Downs arrived in time to see them leaving and exploded, "Is June going riding with that—that cowpuncher?" He pronounced 'cowpuncher' like a cattleman does 'sheepherder.'

"Aw, don't worry, Sam," I said. "June was crazy to ride Brownie and Walt's only seeing how she makes out."

Sam was still waiting when the two came home, and as soon as he could catch June alone, he said he'd come to ask her to the St. Patrick's Day dance in Bixton. That was one of the important social affairs for all of us neighbors, and suddenly I realized it would be tomorrow night. June was flushed from being out in the wind, and was prettier than a wild young deer. Yet she flushed even deeper and looked anywhere except right at Sam Downs as she replied, "Sorry. But you're a little bit too late, Sam. Walt has asked me and I've accepted."

Sam didn't say a word. He stood as if he'd taken root. Then his jaw set at an angle, and he stamped off to see Dad who was in the cow barn milking. Not wanting to miss anything, I trailed him.

"Mel Stonehouse was right," Sam said. "These darned cattle never ought to have been allowed to come here. Now how soon you going to get shed of this datted cowpuncher?"

"Not until May," Dad said mildly.

"Do you know he's taking June to the dance tomorrow night?"

Dad came off his milking stool as if there was a spring under him. "News to me."

"She didn't ask your permission, Harry?"

Dad sputtered a moment. "After all, Sam, when a girl's twenty, she does

about as she pleases... But I'll talk to her. I don't like this any better than you do."

Whatever Dad said to my sister failed to change the situation, and a disapproving silence held my parents next evening when Walt and June made ready to ride to Bixton. Walt had saddled Brownie for June, and she tied a bundle behind the saddle so she could dress up after they reached town. Then came a slight delay while Walt hurried to the bunkhouse and came back with the fancy hair bridle. He put it on Brownie, handed the reins to June and asked, "Like it?"

"Oh, so much! It's a beautiful piece of work," said June, starry-eyed.

Walt helped her up to her saddle, stood a moment gazing up into her face and said, "Then the bridle's yours—if you'll accept it, June."

I did not hear June's reply, for just then all of us noticed a visitor—Mel Stonehouse on his brown plug—and it was Mel's guffaw that attracted everyone's attention. Color rushed up Walt's neck and flooded his face, yet without a word, he stepped lightly into his own saddle and the two horses moved a few steps forward.

MEL GAVE Dad, Mother and June his attention, "'Lo, folks. I've butchered a beef and I'll sell you a quarter if you want it."

I was still watching Walt and June. Mel's back was toward them and Mel did not see Walt abruptly lift his bridle hand and hip around in his saddle, his lips parted as if about to speak, in his eyes an odd, puzzled expression as well. However, instead of speaking or actually halting, he shrugged and faced ahead. Then I was thinking what a graceful, eye-catching pair they made on horseback, my sister and cowboy Walt.

Dad grimaced before answering Mel. Probably he was remembering the last beef we'd bought from our neighbor, so stringy and tough even our cats couldn't eat it. "No, I don't want a quarter," Dad said.

"Okay," Mel replied. "Might as well tell you now that when your stack of hay's gone, I can't sell you any more."

Dad fisted his hand. Little muscles

in his temples twitched. "What's this, Mel? You gave me your word you'd let me have all the hay I needed."

Mel shook his head. "I don't remember pinnin' myself down like that a-tall. Not a-tall. And even if I did, when you let a darned cow outfit get in here, and even let your own daughter go to a dance with a cowpuncher—"

"Shut up!" Dad said. "I need about twenty tons of hay. Do I get it—at the same price—or don't I?"

"You don't get it at any price," Mel said, and then he sneered. "Your daughter's going to get herself talked about."

As I've said, Dad's small-framed and wiry and only about half the size of Mel Stonehouse. Yet he leaped forward, caught Mel around the waist, dragged him out of his saddle, and socked the big fellow right in the mouth before Mel knew what was happening. In another moment however, Mel was coming at Dad like a mad bull. But Dad was dancing around him and Mel's terrific hay-makers went wide.

Dad darted in and out, working on the big fellow's stomach—some of those blows doubling Mel over in knots. Then, panting like a wind-broken horse, he lunged at Dad, and Dad side-stepped and tripped him. I whooped when Mel hit the frozen ground.

"Get up and fight!" Dad challenged, standing ready.

Mel rolled over slowly and I saw he had skinned his face and nose in the dirt. He sat up and wiped blood away with his coat sleeve, and panted, "'Nuff. Lay off, Eastman. Lay off." He staggered to his horse and pulled himself up into the saddle.

"Do I get the hay you promised me?" Dad demanded.

"Nope," said Mel, urging his horse into a lope. "And get shed of that cowpuncher and them cattle or I'll turn every neighbor you got against you."

MOTHER came out into the yard. "I'm proud of you, Harry," she said, putting her arm around Dad's shoulders. "Come in now and wash up... What will we do for hay?"

I thought about that problem, too.

Our dairy stock couldn't rough it like the T G steers. Even if they could, we had sold all of our pasture, and the closest hay we could possibly buy was twenty miles away; fox tail and no good. But I didn't worry too much—until the next morning. Then, what a shock!

I woke up, hearing the sound of wheels in the yard, and hurrying to look out I saw Sam Downs and June in Sam's spring wagon. No sign of Walt Larkin, but Brownie was tied behind Sam's rig.

Dad and Mother were meeting Sam and June just outside the door. "What's wrong, dear?" Mother asked, and June flung herself into Mother's arms and sobbed, "It's too humiliating to talk about." Then sharply, "Bob! Take that hair bridle and throw it in the bunkhouse!"

They disappeared into June's room but I was all ears, all raw-edged nerves, too, listening to Dad asking Sam, "Where's Walt, and what happened?" over and over until Sam said, "Like all wild cowboys, the fellow started drinking and fighting. The fight got so out of hand that the marshal broke it up and slapped Larkin in jail."

"Who started this fight, Sam?" Dad's face was twisted and angry.

Sam didn't look at my father as he answered, "The crazy cowpuncher picked on Jim Hicks, and three-four more of our neighbors took it up. I tried to keep out of it, but did get mixed in. Anyhow, after Walt was put away, I brought June home. She was glad to come with me."

CHAPTER

6

Over A Barrel

DAD UNTIED Brownie, and as Sam drove away, I stood in the yard in my bare feet and nightshirt, with my face a tight knot and my hands balled into fists.

Dad had stopped at the bunkhouse to toss the hair bridle into it. His voice seemed to come from a long way off, "Bob, you were making a hero of that scalaway cowboy. But this ends it. Walt disgraced himself and humiliated your sister. Do you understand that, son?"

"You ain't heard his side yet," I

muttered, and went to my room. But before I could pull on my clothes I had a hard time. Although I was thirteen, I had my face down in the pillow for quite a little while. I suppose June went to bed, for she didn't show up for breakfast.

Toward ten o'clock, Walt rode home, turned his horse into the feed lot, changed his clothes, caught another horse and went out to ride herd on the T G cattle. He had a nasty black eye, face skinned in several places, and his left hand was bandaged.

After he had gone, Mother called to Dad, "Did you tell that man he must leave here?"

"No."

"Well, you must."

Dad seemed as uncomfortable as if he was a kid being told to do something he hated. "I'll think about it," he countered, and shouted to me, "Bob, we'll go get a load of hay."

We hitched old Blue and Prince to the hayrack, and when we had topped the low divide between Mel's farm and ours, we saw Mel's meadow alive with T G cattle which had broken into our haystack and one other. However, Mel and Walt were shoving them back toward our pasture where they belonged.

"More trouble," Dad said. "All because I sold my pasture and let cattle and a darned cowboy come here."

"He's not a darned cowboy," I said. "He's—" I choked.

We drove on to our haystack. There had been two loads of hay left in it, but now all that hadn't been eaten was strewn over the knocked-to-pieces stack-yard, and was almost worthless. Dad was white around the lips as he and I started to fork this mess into the hayrack.

Walt and Mel had cut Mel's cattle away from the T G's and had driven all the steers back through Mel's tumble-down fence, and now both of them came to our hay rack.

"Mr. Eastman," Walt called. "I want a witness to hear what this fellow's asking."

"All right," Mel boomed. "I'm demanding two hundred dollars damage from this T G outfit for their stock busting into my field and eating my

grass and my hay. Fair, ain't it, Harry?"

"What do you say, Walt?" Dad asked, looking hard at the cow-puncher.

"I'm representing the T G outfit and we won't pay Stonehouse a nickel."

Mel sort of puffed himself up and shoved out his heavy face. "Then you'll pay it, Harry Eastman," he rumbled. "You're every bit as responsible as the cow outfit."

Walt said, "Too bad I can't prove that Mr. Stonehouse drove the herd into his field early this morning, although I know he did it."

SO THAT'S how this happened, I thought, looking at Walt and then at Dad and whispering fiercely, "Don't you pay him, Dad."

"Kid," Mel shouted, "I heard you. You're too big for your britches. How'd you like having your pet cowboy get his come-uppance in town last night?"

Walt's good eye shifted to Mel and remained on him. Dad was evidently doing a lot of troubled thinking. At last he said slowly, "On one condition, Mel, I'll pay you a hundred dollars damages. You're to sell me twenty tons more choice hay at five dollars per ton."

I realized Dad was bending over backwards to get hay and thus save our own cattle. But Mel guffawed. "To heck with you fellows," he scoffed. "I'll take the case to court. I'll sue both the T G and Harry Eastman, and collect."

Walt's voice held that certain Irish tone which popped out every once in a while, as he replied, "Will you now, Mr. Stonehouse? Did you ever hear of a legal fence?"

Instantly, from the panic that leaped into Mel's eyes, I knew Walt had scored. Walt went on, "Before anyone can collect damages because stock break into his field he must have what passes for a legal fence... I'll be looking after the cattle... Don't weaken, Mr. Eastman."

Dad said, "That's that, Mel... Now about hay—"

But Mel was riding toward his buildings.

Dad and I hauled home all that was left of the hay. Occasionally we'd chuckle, but mostly we were awful glum. After we'd unloaded the hay and Dad had gone to the house, I caught my pony and, although I'd been told never to slip away to meet Walt, I loped to the big pasture. Walt had pushed the cattle toward its upper end and was casually poking around among the herd when I rode up to him.

"Hi, Walt. What you looking for?"

"Hi, Bob. I've been counting the steers. One's missing."

"You keep an awful close check on them," I said.

"Yes. It's something a good cow-hand learns to do." He gave me a probing look and went on, "You're all wound up. What's wrong?"

"Everything!" I said. "I want to side with you, but I'm June's brother and they say you 'humiliated' her."

Walt dug out his pipe and lighted it; acted as if the smoke didn't taste good and asked, "And what else, Bob?"

"Sam Downs says all the trouble is because the cattle and you are here. Mel Stonehouse won't let us have hay because of that, and our cattle'll starve and die. I don't know what about your horses. Dad's mixed up, too. He licked Mel yesterday, and now I'm proud of him, wanting to side him as well as you. Only he knows he's got to tell you to go away. Mother's told him you must find another place to board."

"As bad as all that?" said Walt... "Your father licked Mel?" as if he couldn't believe it. I nodded and he went on, "That's good! Like you, I'm proud of your dad—at last... But I must find another place to hang my hat?... Maybe I can put up with Sam Downs. We'd hit it off fine, two fellows in love with the same girl."

"You—in—love—with—June? You, Walt?"

HE DIDN'T seem to hear me. "Thanks for telling me, Bob," he said. "Your neighbors won't believe my side of what happened in Bixton. The marshal wouldn't let me out of jail until after I agreed to pay a fine about eight this morning... I sup-

pose those fellows told June that I was drunk and picked a fight?" Walt ended on a bitter, grim note. I nodded. "But come on home, Walt. Tell Dad your side and—"

He put a firm hand on my shoulder. "Bob, I'd rather Sam'd tell your folks the truth. Or perhaps Mel Stonehouse."

I said, "Mel won't ever tell the folks the truth. Nope. Sam? We'll, till now I've thought he was a good egg. But he'll say only what Mel tells him to say. He'll lie, Walt."

We were now riding slowly homeward. Walt squinted his one good eye and his crinkly smile showed itself once again. "Maybe not, Bob. Sam's in a spot. But he knows right from wrong."

"Sure thing he does," I agreed. "And oh! you're thinking he'll feel like I do when I know I've been bad and I hurt inside thinking of it and how ashamed I am of having been a smartie and a fool."

"That's it, Bob! So if Sam's the man I still think he is, and if Mel's hold on him isn't too, too strong—Well, we'll see... By the way, Bob, how many cattle does Mel Stonehouse own?"

This abrupt change of subject startled me. "Gosh, 'I don't know. Why?"

"You don't know? Yet you've got your heart set on being a cowpuncher." Walt was half laughing, to soften the reproach in his words.

"What's that got to do with it? With being a cowboy?"

"Only that it's second nature with a cowhand to tally every small bunch of cattle he sees. And you've been seeing Mel's skin-and-bone scrubs every few days recently."

"Yes. But—Walt, do you know how many Mel's got?"

"I've chased them out of the pasture often enough to know. Also I've tallied those in his feed lot. Seventy-one head all told."

"I'll be darned," I said, awed. "What's this all about?"

"I wanted you to be able to verify that tally. Suppose your father can do it?"

"No, Walt. Dad's never counted Mel's cattle either... Heck, I don't

see why you're interested in how many head Mel owns... You said that one T G steer's missing. I'd think you'd be more worried about that."

"I'm worried plenty, Bob." Walt's face had turned sober and his cheerful unblackened eye held a hard glint. "And I'm concerned about how many cattle Mel owns for this reason: Yesterday evening he told your family he had butchered a beef, and—"

"Oh, yes," I cut in. "I saw you look at him, puzzled like."

"So-o? Well, I'd come in from riding, only a half hour earlier, and I'd just tallied Mel's scrubs once again. Seventy-one head! Today, Bob, I have counted our herd. Such a big, hard job I don't often do it. One is missing. Oh, here we are at home. Don't say a word about this, yet. Not one word."

THE SUN was down, the wind quiet, and there, standing outside the stable with Dad, was Sam Downs. He didn't speak to Walt nor Walt to him, but Dad burst out, "Now Mel Stonehouse is taking out his spite on Sam as well as on you and me, Walt."

Dismounting, Walt stepped right up to Sam. "Why'd Mel turn on you after you backed his play so strong last night?"

Sam looked down at his big overshoes and squirmed. "Mel's our leader, and last night he made it sound like your T G cow outfit would put us out of business... But, honest, I'm ashamed now of what we did. It was dirty."

Dad's eyebrows were high-raised question marks, his eyes wide. "What was this dirty work, Sam?"

Sam almost ran his words together. "Walt wasn't drunk. Mel got five of us to gang up on him, try to beat the whey out of him. And we lied to the marshal so he'd jail Walt."

"All right," said Walt. "You've squared yourself with me by telling Mr. Eastman how it really was. Now, when did Mel turn on you? What's his threat?"

"Today Mel told me I was now all the same as part of the Eastman fam-

ily and he was going to run Harry Eastman out of the country. Me, too. He won't sell me another ton of hay, and that'll break me... Walt, that man sure has got me and Harry over a barrel."

"Maybe not," said Walt. "Go talk to Mrs. Eastman and June. Get that something off your chest and you'll feel better."

Sam nodded. "I know I've got to come clean with June, and I'll do it." He squared his shoulders and walked toward the house.

Walt's eye caught Dad's. "Still want me to find another place to board?"

"No," said Dad. "Hell, no! But I don't see how we can feed your horses or my stock. We're out of hay."

"I'll take that matter up with Mel Stonehouse early tomorrow morning," Walt said.

CHAPTER

7

What's He Going To Do?

AS A RESULT of Sam's talk with Mother and June, Mother ate supper with Dad, Walt and me. June, however, did not appear. It was a silent meal, with Dad and Mother so deeply worried they had nothing to say.

Later, toward ten o'clock, I woke up from a nightmare about Mel, so frightened that I looked out at my window to assure myself he wasn't present. Thus, I saw Walt's erect figure leaving the stable and riding away in the starlight directly toward Mel's farm.

What's he going to do? I wish I could be with him... But he'd not want me.

I was having another bad dream when Dad awakened me, quietly, so as not to disturb Mother and June. "Son, Walt wants you and me to get a half dozen of our neighbors together. You're to go to Mason's place and Goodhue's and tell them they must be here before daybreak."

In a moment I was dressing. "What's up, Dad? What's Walt planning to do?"

"Well, don't tell the neighbors yet. Pretend you don't know," Dad said

tensely. "Walt has told me only that he has been scouting Mel's buildings and that now he is prepared to give that fellow what he's got coming."

Since Dad had no saddle horse, Walt supplied one of his so Dad could visit other neighbors while I was getting Mason and Goodhue. The men grumbled a lot, asking questions I could not answer, but they came with me. By six o'clock there were six men as well as Dad and Walt and me at the E Bar.

Walt pretended he did not notice their unfriendliness. "We're going to visit Mr. Stonehouse and catch him by surprise," he said.

It was a cold and cloudy dawn with a fine frost falling. All of us were shivering when we rode quietly into Mel's yard. Dad asked Sam Downs to go with him and they stepped into Mel's house without knocking. Presently they came out, pushing Mel ahead of them.

Mel saw Walt and growled, "What you doin' here with these men? What's the meaning of this?"

"We want the answer to that, too," Goodhue said, and all looked at Walt. Walt said, "Mr. Eastman, Sam, keep Mel quiet while these other fellows search his buildings. Get busy, men."

I took no part in the search, just watched Mel, arrogant and oozing defiance when the men reported the discovery of four quarters of fresh beef hanging in his ice house. "Sure, I've butchered one of my own critters," Mel boomed. "What's wrong with that?"

Walt asked quietly, "Where's the hide off this beef?"

Mel stuttered a moment. "Hell, I took it to town and sold it."

"Keep looking, men," Walt ordered. "Think of places where our friend would be most likely to cache a hide he didn't want found."

FOR HALF an hour—during which I was sweating with tension and worry—it seemed as if no beef hide could be found. Then Mason and Goodhue dug out the old chaff in the mangers of Mel's barn and underneath found a rolled-up hide, still fresh and not frozen. This they car-

ried out and unfolded on the ground so all of us, including Mel saw the T G brand on it. Then I knew why Walt had prowled Mel's buildings during the night: to make sure this evidence was here!

I saw something more than the hide, too. I saw our neighbors who had always backed Mel Stonehouse, suddenly turn against him; I saw them studying both Walt and Dad with respect in their faces and eyes. John Maxfield snapped, "I'll go get the sheriff."

Walt held up his hand. "Don't do that, sir. I'll tell this petty thief what he must do. Okay?"

All six of the neighbors nodded agreement, but Mel who was no longer either arrogant or defiant, tried to beg off. "Listen, my good friends, I'll pay for the steer. That should settle the matter. Of course. And, Sam, Harry, I'll sell you the hay you'll need. Same price as before."

Bringing up the subject of hay was a mistake on Mel's part, because John Maxfield instantly asked, "What's this?" glancing at Dad and at Sam. "Has Mel refused to let you men have more hay?"

Getting two affirmative nods, Maxfield's rugged face turned as red as a Wyoming sunset. He burst out hotly, "We pride ourselves on being honest, law abiding men whose word is good. But Mel Stonehouse, you've broken your word. All of us know you did agree to sell both Harry and Sam more hay than they'd already bought, and at the same price."

Mel tried to say something, but couldn't seem to find the right words. Savagely Maxfield went on, "We're all through with you, Mel... Tell him what he must do, Walt, and if that doesn't suit us farmers we'll call the sheriff and send this thief over the road."

"False friends, turnin' against—" Mel sputtered.

"You had this coming for a long time, Mel," Walt interrupted. "Losing your prestige here is a heavy penalty, so all I ask is that you sell everything out and hit the trail for parts elsewhere. These men will appraise your outfit and name a reasonable price and I reckon one of them

will buy it. Agree, Mel?"

"Have it your way," said Mel, a gleam in his eye which I believed meant he was glad to be getting off so easily.

The neighbors consulted, then Maxfield said, "We allow seven thousand dollars will be a liberal amount for everything Mel owns; land, horses, cattle and equipment. Either Sam or Mr. Eastman really ought to have this farm, joining their places the way it does."

"Mr. Eastman, Sam," said Walt, "I'll help to stake whichever one of you decides he wants this outfit and I'd like you men to come to town and witness the deal... By the way, this beef is T G beef, so I want Eastman to have one hind quarter and the rest of you to share the balance."

That met with approval. Most of our neighbors didn't have good beef any more often than we did.

NOW DAD told me to go on home and do the chores. I hated to leave Walt, but there was no help for it, and to my surprise, Sam Downs came to the E Bar right behind me.

"What's biting you?" I asked.

"Keep your inquisitive nose out of this," he replied, dismounting at the house where Mother and June had a fire going and were doing a lot of worrying and wondering.

I didn't hear what Sam said to them. But in a few minutes he was gone. June brought the milk pails to the cowbarn and pitched in to give me a hand. June could do anything around a farm, but since she'd been teaching school she had stopped doing the mean chores.

"Sam tell you the great news?" I burst out. "Walt spiked Mel's schemes and we'll get all the hay we need because either Sam or Dad'll buy Mel's farm."

"Yes," she said, busy milking.

"Well, ain't you happy 'bout it? I'm jus' up in the clouds. 'Specially cause it was Walt saved us—and the neighbors ain't mad at him nor at us no more neither."

"That's nice. How many times must I tell you not to use 'ain't' and 'no more neither'?"

"Phooey! Why'd Sam have to see you before he went to Bixton with the other men?"

"I might as well tell you, my nosy little brother. Sam wanted to know if he should buy Mel's farm, which would give him a hay meadow and eventually make him prosperous."

"Well, gee whiz, you sure told him to go to it, didn't you?"

"The catch was, Sam didn't want it unless I'd marry him."

"So-ho! June, you and Sam'll do swell and go places. Thanks to Walt. He ain't no busted cowboy, like they say all of 'em are. He said he'd help stake either Sam—or Dad."

"Sam and I aren't going anywhere together," June said in a flat tone.

She had milked two cows to my one and now jumped up and went out. I trailed her to the yard. The wind had come up and was whistling shrilly, beating against us and chilling our faces. June however was gazing toward the distant snowy mountains.

"Bob," she said, barely above a whisper, "I've never liked this everlasting wind, nor these plains nor this vile alkali water. Nor a dairy farm either... I'd love the mountains, but there's no chance of that now. Not after that frightening night in Bixton when I didn't stand up for him. When I ran out on him."

She wheeled away from me and sped to the house, milk slopping from her pail, and left me open-mouthed.

It was near noon when Dad and Walt came home. "Great news, Ethel," Dad shouted as Mother came out to meet him. "We now own Mel's land. Add that to the big pasture and Walt assures me that we've got a cow spread, an outfit to take care of two hundred range cows the year around, and I'm going to get range cows."

"Bob and I'll be cowmen, and the neighbors think that's great. Wish they could become cowmen, too... And, Ethel, we don't have to buy hay either, because now I own the hay!"

"Naturally you'll let Sam have all he needs," Mother got in. Although they were old married folks, they were embracing each other.

"Sam?" Dad said. "I nigh forgot.

Goodhue bought Sam's place, for Sam's going to pull out."

Walt had ridden to the barn, and I was right there, saying, "If Dad's really going to be a cowman, I won't have to run away to be a cowboy. A cowboy like you, Walt."

He smiled his crinkly smile. "I'm glad you won't be running away, Bob... Now I must saddle another horse and look after the steers."

Then, although it went against the grain since to my notion no cowboy ought to fall for a girl, I said, "Everything's come out right 'cept one thing, Walt. You're the wonderfuller man in this world, yet—"

"What's the one thing, Bob?"

"I don't know how to say it. But if you saddle Brownie, maybe June'll ride with you 'safternoon... You might ask her. Still, I don't suppose you've got a ranch or any kind of home in the mountains, or—" I stopped, confused.

Walt was looking hard at me. Then came his crinkly smile and he poked my ribs with the thumb of his bandaged left hand "Shucks, I know one thing hasn't come out right, Bob.... No," he went on thoughtfully, "I don't own a ranch or any home. But my big boss has offered me a manager's job on one of his ranches, a good house for myself and family—if and when I have one—including board and furnishings, and one hundred dollars a month... Help me catch and saddle Brownie."

June went riding with him all right. Neither of them had had any dinner, yet they didn't come home until twilight, riding slowly and close together. At the bunkhouse they stopped. Walt dismounted, stepped inside and came out with that fancy horse hair bridle. He slipped the old headstall off Brownie and put the new one in its place. He was about to hand June the reins when she simply tumbled right into his arms.

By this time I had come close enough to see their faces, and one look told me, better than a thousand words, that this last thing had now come out right too! ●END

WHERE DID ALL THE BULLETS COME FROM?

THERE was considerable agreement that the heavy-set, bulldog-jawed Austin gunman would be bound to get it sooner or later, for Ben Thompson had never been a man to run from trouble. (If he had, he would have been running constantly.) And so, even in the 1880's, the people of South Texas considered Thompson headed surely for a six-by-three. It became simply a question of by whom would he be dispatched and how soon—and how many corpses he would leave around him.

Oddly enough, this man who became such a pest in Austin, Texas, his home, died in San Antonio, within plain sight of hundreds of persons—most of them never knew how it happened. Perhaps those who testified at the inquest told the truth, but there is other evidence that it was a three or four or even five-sided fight. At any rate, there were too many bullets in him.

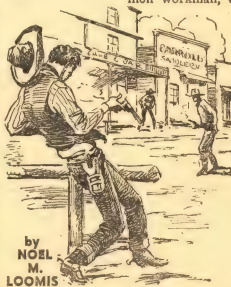
Ben Thompson was born in England or in Texas or in Nova Scotia, about 1843. At 13 he shot a pal of his, and from then on he walked a violent road. He was said to be a kind and pleasant man when he was sober, but a rip-snorting hellcat when he was drunk. He was evidently drunk a good deal of the time.

Ben started life as a printer, and presently was working on the *Picayune* in New Orleans. The story is that he observed a Frenchman bothering a young lady, and interfered; that they fought, and Ben injured the Frenchman with a knife.

It is also said that the Frenchman subsequently challenged him to a duel, and there are several versions of the duel, but all of them end the same way: Ben, as the challenged, had the choice of weapons, and proposed that they enter a darkened room and fight with knives; they were blindfolded and given bowie knives, steered into an icehouse and locked in; and a few minutes later Ben came out, leaving the Frenchman dead.

It is said that Ben, being a common workman, was made the object of a search by the Creole aristocrats, and had to be smuggled out of the city at night.

This apparently is Ben's own story of the New Orleans episode—but it presents questions. The dueling code in New Orleans was very strict. It is true that when the Americans went into Crescent City, around 1800, and began to fight, they introduced some refinements—or, more properly, variations—of the duel, in which the primary object was to kill, and the bloodier the better. These duels, how-



by
NOEL
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LOOMIS

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One of the most controversial questions in Texas' early raw-red gun-law history is: Who killed Ben Thompson?

ever, were usually among the Americans and seldom included the aristocratic Creoles, for it was a part of the code that no "gentleman" would

was used in its old-world sense entirely. So it seems extremely doubtful that Ben Thompson, a printer without social standing, would find himself in a duel with a Creole "gentlemen." It does make a good story for a beginning, however.

He returned to Austin to work as a printer, but began to haunt the gambling houses, and probably drifted into gambling as a sideline.

WHEN THE Civil War broke out, he enlisted and was stationed at Fort Clark. Here he took some rations—more than his share—and the mess sergeant demanded their return. Ben shot him. A lieutenant intervened and received a shot in the neck which killed him.

Ben escaped from Fort Clark and joined the Texas Confederate Army somewhere else. Here he started gambling as a business, and smuggled whisky as a sideline. He wound up in Laredo and killed two Mexicans in a quarrel over a game of cards. He had quite a time getting away from the Mexicans, but managed. Then he was assigned to raise a company of soldiers in Austin—a hot spot during the Civil War, for Texas had been settled by Yankees as well as Southerners, and sympathy for the Confederacy was by no means universal. He got into a scrap with John Coombs, a member of the Home Guards, Coombs died. Ben landed in jail.

He escaped, either during the war or after the war, and lit out for Mexico, where he joined Maximilian's cause and fought under General Mejia. He came back and was arrested again—one version says for the killing of Coombs, one for the killing of another man named Brown. He was convicted, sentenced to the penitentiary, and served two years.

After his release, he took up gambling and drinking and shooting with considerable vigor—and for Ben Thompson that meant prying the lid off.

Ben hit the Texas Cattle trails. He and his friend, Phil Coe, opened a saloon in Abilene—the Bulls Head. Coe operated it, while Ben Thompson roamed the country between Abilene and Texas.

Coe was a huge, handsome man, impeccably dressed as were most gamblers in that day, and a hand with the ladies. A woman named Jessie Hazel came to town from Kansas City, and Phil Coe became enamored of her. So did Wild Bill Hickok, who was marshal of Abilene at that time. Hickok too was a big, handsome man, and went over his head for Jessie. The next thing we know, Phil Coe was dead with two bullets from Wild Bill's derringer. Jessie Hazel must have been a dish.

Many thousands of words have been printed in speculating on a gun fight between Hickok and Thompson. Other thousands have wondered why there never was a shoot-out between them. Certainly Thompson was the kind of man who didn't know enough to be scared, and he was belligerent when drinking—but he wasn't dumb when it came to guns. Perhaps it is fair to say that neither Thompson nor Hickok wanted that meeting.

When Phil Coe was killed, Thompson had gone to Kansas City to visit his wife and had gotten his leg broken in a buggy wreck. By the time he returned to Abilene, Hickok was no longer there. Thompson claimed that the authorities in Abilene had liquidated the Bull's Head Saloon, and that Hickok made a very substantial personal profit. But Abilene wasn't the only trailtown on the Great Plains...

There was also, meantime, Ben's brother, Billy. Billy was younger but, some say, more pugnacious. He started fights for Ben to finish—and Ben was a good finisher. So Ben and Billy made the rounds of Hays City, Ogallala, and finally Ellsworth, running a faro game or monte or poker—whatever the customers wanted.

IN THE summer of 1873 they stayed in Ellsworth. There was a formidable array of gunfighters on the side of the law in that town. There were also several hundred Texas trail-herders—and Wyatt Earp.

There is no reason to believe that Wyatt Earp was a coward—nor was he a fool. In his later work in Tombstone he was never reckless. So the

story that Earp, with his pistols in their holsters, walked up to Ben Thompson, while Thompson held a loaded shotgun on him, and persuaded Ben to back down, is a little hard to understand.

If the story is true, then Ben's belligerence must have faded abruptly—which is possible but not the most likely thing in the world. It seems more reasonable that, if this encounter had taken place, Ben would have kept the shotgun aimed at Earp's belly, and no gunfighter, backed by hundreds of partisans and seemingly with a free hand, would back down when he had an advantage like that...

There were many and complicated interests in the early trailtowns. The mayors and leading business men usually had money invested in saloons, gambling houses, and dance halls, and they did not look kindly on men who came in and cut into their profits. Naturally they appointed police officers who would be favorable to them. Naturally too, most of these appointees were not eager, for \$50 a month, to be shot at by experts. Understandably, they often took cover and sprayed their opponents with buckshot. They were not paid for being heroes or for harboring any idealistic thoughts about making the frontier a safe place for women to raise flowers. They were not paid for keeping the peace; they were paid for obeying orders.

The Texans, in these few months of turmoil, claimed that they were arrested without cause, fined so the officers could get their commissions, and shaken down in every way possible. It may have been true; if so, it is odd that Ben Thompson should have been fined \$25 for being an accessory to murder, as is reported.

A fight started in Ben Thompson's gambling house one day in August. Deputy Sheriff Hogue and Deputy Marshal "Happy Jack" Morco, two of Thompson's most sincere enemies, stopped the fight and got the other man out of the place. But the man returned and invited Ben to come out and fight, using some uncomplimentary names preceded by the word "Texas."

The two Thompsons both came out—one with a rifle, the other with a shotgun. The belligerent citizen wilted and began making plenty of sign, all with the toes pointing away from the scene. But Billy, drunk, fired his shotgun into the air, and immediately the citizens of Ellsworth and the cowboys from Texas poured into the street, ready to settle this issue. It had been simmering all summer, and they wanted to see it come to a head.

A number of things happened, but the thing that counted was that Billy killed Sheriff Whitney, who had been friendly to them. Now whether Ben was finally backed down by Wyatt Earp and paid a \$25 fine, or whether he surrendered his guns to Mayor Jim Miller and was released on \$10,000 cash bond, is the question. It would seem fairly simple to answer, but the various versions go from one extreme to the other.

Wyatt Earp, it should be noted, was not marshal of Abilene at the time. He was made marshal on the spot when Jim Miller, disgusted with his other lawmen, fired them all and sent Earp after Thompson.

One speech has Earp say: "I kept my eye on Ben's right hand at the trigger guard of the shotgun. I figured he'd cut loose at thirty or forty yards, and when I saw the muscles move in his wrist, I'd draw."

Well, it sounds good—but did you ever try watching "the muscles move" in a man's wrist at a hundred feet?

At any rate, Ben was never convicted of helping in the killing of Whitney. Billy was already out of town and was indicted, but he stayed lost for quite a while, until finally he was caught in Texas, extradited, and brought to trial. Then he was acquitted.

THE SANTA FE RAILROAD had run its line into Pueblo and was in a knock-down-and-drag-out fight with the D. & R. G. over a line into Denver. Oddly enough, the book *Santa Fe*, though it mentions Bat and Ed Masterson, does not speak of Thompson, but there seems substan-

tial evidence that he was on hand in Pueblo.

One report says he stood off a mob of D. & R. G. men; another says he was promised \$5,000 by the Santa Fe, but that the D. & R. G. gave him \$20,000 to surrender. Still another says that he held the roundhouse as long as he had contracted to—until the eastbound express left at 11:55 a. m. Whatever happened, apparently he wasn't there long.

He went back to Austin and set up gambling. He also continued drinking. He was not over five feet eight, with a heavy build, and now his face took on a bloated look. He had clear blue eyes with eyebrows inclined to meet across the bridge of the nose, and a fine heavy mustache with sweeping ends. He ran for marshal and was defeated, but ran again.

The second time, he pepped up his campaign with a double killing. He had already caused trouble in a saloon, and this time a special policeman warned him away. Thompson slapped him—hard. The man went for a shotgun. He came out and fired but missed. It was a bad tactical mistake, for he died with four bullets in him. The bartender took a pot-shot and then ducked behind the bar—and whether it was luck or skill, Ben's return shot went through the wooden bar and into the bartender's neck; he lived for several weeks.

Thompson was acquitted, and then elected. Shooting crimes in Austin promptly dropped.

But Thompson presently became almost too much even for Austin. He liked to shoot up rival gambling houses; he is said to have shot up a cattlemen's convention just for the sport of it, and it is reported that Shanghai Pierce took part of a window frame as he exited.

That is not as far-fetched as it might sound, for the old cattleman had been in Abilene when Ben was immobilized in Kansas City with a broken leg, and although Pierce knew him, he refrained from contributing anything toward the \$3,000 Phil Coe was raising to send for Ben's expenses. Under such circumstances, and considering Ben's temperament, especially in his later

years, it is not altogether out of reason that Ben might have shot up the convention—and if that is true, it would have been good manners for Pierce to get out of reach without delay.

In 1882 Ben went to San Antonio. The Palace of Chance was owned by a one-armed man, Jack Harris, who had been a scout and guide in the Confederate Army and, before that, in the "Mormon War" of 1857. He sent word to Thompson that he was not welcome at the Palace of Chance.

AFTER SPARRING around for a couple of days, Ben went to the Variety House bar, one of the toughest places in the state of Texas, and inquired about the Shotgun Brigade which he had been told was awaiting him. One-armed Harris was informed, and did arm himself with a shotgun, but Thompson, on his next go-round, caught sight of Harris through a venetian blind and shot three times.

He was acquitted, for Harris had been armed with a shotgun; that made it self-defense.

Some rather improbable dialog in this encounter is reported by Colonel Buck Walton, Thompson's long-time attorney and biographer. Walton says Thompson called out, "What are you going to do with that shotgun?" and Harris answered that he was going to shoot Thompson with it. It seems strange that the shotguns in Ben Thompson's life were so clumsily wielded. A shotgun cannot be swung very fast—that is true—but a man like Harris should have known where to point it from the beginning.

After the acquittal, Ben was persuaded to resign his office of marshal. Anyway, his brother Billy was busy getting into trouble, and Ben was busy getting him out.

Major Walton says the Refugio County murder charge against Billy was not justified, but some have wondered if Walton was a competent witness, since Ben Thompson was his foremost client.

Well, as the old-timers said, it was just a question of time. Ben Thompson was building up for an almighty fall. And it would seem so. He once shot up an Italian's street organ and

he joined that legion of men who have attempted to sway editorial policies with six-guns when he stam-peded into the office of the *Austin Statesman*.

Fortunately for the Fourth Estate, neither the owner nor the editor was present.

So it was on a day in March, 1884, that Ben met King Fisher, a man who himself had been on both sides of the law, a man whom Ben had known for a long time. At a time when King Fisher was heading out-laws along the Rio Grande, he started the first Hollywood dude outfit—a fancy Mexican sombrero, black velvet Mexican jacket embroidered in gold, a scarlet sash, boots polished so a man could see to shave in them, and silver-plated sixshooters with ivory butt-plates. At this time in 1884, however, he had reformed and sobered up and dressed more conservatively.

King Fisher was known to be a close friend of Jack Harris's partner, and it seems unlikely that either Fisher or Thompson could have been unaware of each other's connection with Harris.

They had once been on unfriendly terms, but that was supposed to be over. Fisher had been made deputy sheriff of Uvalde County. He was in Austin on business, and when the business was finished, he and Thompson made the rounds of the Austin saloons.

Then Fisher urged Ben to go to San Antonio with him. They went on the train, and Thompson was ugly. It may be significant that Fisher, no slouch with a gun himself, told Ben that if he didn't let the passengers alone, either he or Thompson would die.

It is also reported with some reliability that word of Thompson's trip to San Antonio was wired from Austin to the Vaudeville Theatre—the late Jack Harris' place. It seems odd that this word, if it needed wiring at all, was not wired to the San Antonio police.

THE TWO reached San Antonio in the evening and went to the Menger Hotel. They came down

wearing fine broadcloth suits, white shirts with black string ties, fancy brocaded silk vests, and black boots with high heels. (This was about the time high heels began to be worn on boots.) Fisher wore a wide white hat and Thompson a flat-topped black one with a yellow silk lining.

They had some drinks and then went to see Ada Gray in *East Lynne* at the Turner Opera House. Reinforcements of liquor were taken on between acts, and then they went, "persuaded" by Fisher, to the Vaudeville Theatre in the Palace of Chance. (Harris had developed the place into an institution. Downstairs was the saloon. In the gambling rooms they had everything. In the theater were women more attractive for their lack inhibitions than for their vaudeville ability. There were also rooms for private parties, and in the end everything was designed to separate a man from his money.)

Thompson had a roll of bills amounting to \$20,000, and teased the girl about paying for the drinks. He was buying for Fisher, a huge Mexican policeman named Jacob S. Coy, a professional gambler named Simms, and himself. Ben demanded that Joe Foster, Harris's old partner, shake hands with him. Foster declined to shake hands or drink with Ben. Ben slapped him with one hand and drew his own revolver with the other. Coy held down his arm, with Ben cursing and firing. They were upstairs in the "dress circle" or balcony of the theater.

Simms said Ben jammed his pistol into Foster's mouth, but this seems unlikely, for Foster was hit in the leg. (He died later.) Thompson, Fisher and Coy fell on the floor together. A new barrage of shots rang out, and it was over.

Hundreds of men at the burlesque have watched—if they weren't hunting exits. The powder-smoke went slowly to the ceiling. Thompson and Fisher both were dead. Thompson had nine wounds, Fisher thirteen. Why did Fisher have more than Thompson? Was he persuaded to put Thompson on the spot, and then he himself double-crossed?

But nine and thirteen make twenty-two. Ordinarily a six-shooter carried five cartridges which means that at least five arms were in on the play. It is unlikely that either Coy or Foster carried three guns; in fact, it is unlikely that either carried two. Where did the extra shots come from?

Two "eye-witnesses" told a newspaper reporter that either Sims or Coy shot Thompson in the ear with his own gun, and Fisher likewise. At any rate, something was up, for Fisher got the most wounds, while Coy,

who was struggling with Thompson, got none.

An autopsy showed that five shots had struck Thompson from above, and a book published in 1934 names three men who were said to be concealed in a theater box to do the killing. This is supported by the fact that five of the bullets in Thompson were identified as from Winchester rifles. The coroner's verdict for Coy and Simms: self-defense.

One thing is sure: nobody at the Vaudeville Theatre that night asked for his money back. ● END

TWO GUNS, TWO FACES

"Even one like Charlie?"

She got red and said, "I wasn't—I mean a man who didn't think well of his father."

Russ said, "Honey, he was the finest man I ever knew, even if he was a stubborn old cuss with all the qualities of a jack—"

"Hush," she said, "hush, you reckless idiot or I'll—"

"You'll what?" Russ grinned and kissed her and the horses stirred in the far corral hearing that smack. I slipped out the door.

Outside, I heard her say, sort of

(continued from page 17)

breathless-like, "Russ, Pete'll see us."

Russ' voice was kind of muffled, like he was nuzzling her hair with his nose. "He's busy with that ham bone," he said.

Durn fool. As if I'd chew on that ham bone after socking Charlie with it. I clumped on down to the bunkhouse, leading my pony.

"Looks like me and you got a home, old hoss," I said, like I usually talk to my pony when nobody else is around. He nuzzled my shoulder and I dodged. That ornery old cayuse always does that just 'fore he takes a nip out of me. ● END

TOO TOUGH

now, my dear. It's all over and you can forget about him and live your own life. This big ruffian here was only trying to impress you by whipping everybody else who looked at you. Now that he's found out he can't, he'll leave you alone. It would have been much simpler if he'd just told you he loved you and—"

"I knew he loved me!" Jessica snapped impatiently. "I don't need any foot-racing dude to tell me that!... But I thought I hated him. He—he was too tough and too sure of himself and I never thought he'd need a woman to look after him. But you—you're the one who's a brute, Davey Dawson! You just kept *beating* him and *beating*—"

Tears began to stream down Jessica's pretty face again as her anger at Dawson mingled with her sympathy for Mitch. She clutched Mitch Gaines' face to her breast and peered

(continued from page 24)

intently at his glassy eyes. "Don't worry, Mitch," she said soothingly. "We'll—we'll get a doctor and have you patched—"

The glassy look did not leave Mitch Gaines' eyes, but he mumbled, as if to himself, "So it was all like hand-springs—and she said she knew I loved her. Well, I'll declare."

Jessica's glance clung to Mitch's eyes. "Didn't you know it, Mitch?"

"Not until just now," Mitch said groggily. He reached for her hand and pulled her down beside him, noticing the stunned expression on Davey Dawson's face as the man watched incredulously. Just before he kissed Jessica, Mitch murmured, "I was beginning to get suspicious of myself when I kissed you last night, but who'd have thought I was in love?"

"Me," Jessica laughed happily as she returned his kiss. ● END

by RUSS WINTERBOTHAM

The way Shorty figured it was, if a six-gun made a little man just as good as a big man, then two six-guns would make him twice as good...

GOPHER JACKSON was full of the cactus juice that Mexicans call tequila. He stood in the dusty center of Wagner's main, and only, street and howled to the



Goph was dead before he hit the floor.

NOT MUCH MORE THAN A TRIGGER

world that he was a lusty wolf with itchy teeth and that there wasn't a son of a coyote in the county with skin thick enough to stop his bite.

Even when he was sober Goph had none of the southern charm that often speeds the rise and fall of a lady's bosom. He was a nasty, greasy, sneering, ox-framed varmint. He stood about six-two, weighed well over 200, and never picked on anybody his size. He had as many pals as the gila that lived in a chicken coop.

Wagner was a real sociable town that sort of winked at the didoes cowboys pulled. Goph wasn't the first ranny that howled in the center of the street, and he wasn't the only one that had been drinking this particular summer evening.

In fact, nobody would have given much heed to what took place if Gopher hadn't pulled a six-gun from his holster and fired a well-aimed shot through the window of Homer Reilly's General Store, which knocked the nose off a lady manikin and broke six thundermugs on a shelf directly behind her.

The sound of the shot was heard distinctly in Tommy Gander's saloon, which served beer and red-eye whiskey, but no tequila.

Tommy, the proprietor, had been chewing the fat with various and sundry patrons when he heard the shot. Tommy was a real pleasant sort of person. He was helpful when you were drunk, trustful when you were broke, friendly when you were sad, and generous, except when you took advantage of him.

"That," said Tommy, "sounded like a shot."

Tommy, in fact most of the patrons in his saloon, had been around long enough to know the difference between a gunshot and anything else you could name.

Tommy had simply made the statement as a matter of record, for Marshal Mulligan to hear. The lawman, at that moment, was consuming beer at the bar and while he poured it into

his mouth, and not his ears, it could be that he was so deeply concentrated on his task that he hadn't noticed.

Some time back there had been a rule about carrying guns in Wagner. It had been enforced by one of those famous marshals who could look into the eyes of a badman and tame him, and who could shoot six bullets through the neck of a bottle without breaking it. The only trouble was, that marshal finally ran up against a cockeyed badman whom nobody could look into the eyes of.

But the rule against guns remained. And guns ceased to be part of formal dress in Wagner. You saw guns, of course, because everybody had a shooting iron or two, but nobody wore them unless he was going out of town, or just riding in. Nobody except the marshal, that is, and Tommy Gander had a six-gun on a shelf under the bar, for use in case of an emergency. But that gun wasn't worn and it didn't count.

Particularly, nobody stood in the dusty center of Wagner's main street and shot off the noses of manikins in the window of Homer Reilly's General Store.

Tommy noticed that the marshal had his mouth full of beer and couldn't hear a thing, so he went to the swinging doors of the saloon and peeked out, hoping perhaps that somebody's roof had collapsed and it hadn't been a pistol shot at all. Wagner was full of peaceful men like Tommy, who didn't give a hoot for leadslinging.

Naturally Tommy saw Gopher Jackson, who hadn't moved much, drawing a bead on the horseshoe over the door of the blacksmith shop.

TOMMY DUCKED his head back in the saloon and went over to the bar and told the marshal that Gopher Jackson was drunk, and shooting up the town.

"Gopher Jackson hasn't been in this saloon all evening," said the marshal.

This was true, because Tommy didn't serve tequila and that was what Goph was drunk on. Perhaps this was one reason why Tommy particularly wanted Goph tossed in the clink, but

Tommy didn't say so.

"If you step to the door, marshal," said Tommy, "you can see him in the moonlight."

Just then there was a blast and a clang as Gopher hit the horseshoe.

"And," Tommy Gander added, "you can hear him right where you're standing."

The marshal hitched up his pants, said a little prayer, and walked to the door. When he reached it, he put his right hand on the walnut handle of his forty-four and pushed the door open.

"Gopher," he said, "it's agin the law to tote a gun, let alone shoot one, in town."

"Do tell," said Gopher, and he pivoted with the pistol in his hand. The marshal's gun leaped out of its holster a fraction of a second too late. Gopher's slug caught him in the ribs. Only hasty shooting kept the lawman from joining several of his predecessors on Boot Hill.

The slug put the marshal down and out of commission, and nobody else had a gun handy except Tommy, who kept his right where it always had been, on the shelf behind the bar.

"I guess that's enough fun for tonight," said Gopher Jackson. He put his forty-four in its holster. "I'll be back tomorrow night, if you boys will oblige me by settin' up a new marshal to shoot at."

The boys who had crowded out of the saloon doors didn't answer. They were too busy trying to find out if the old marshal was dead or not.

Tommy and some of the boys got the lawman inside and spread him out on a table. They brought bandages and somebody went for a sawbones, and then they found out that the marshal wasn't badly hurt, but probably would be laid up for a few days.

"What are we gonna do?" said Tommy, who also was mayor of Wagner. "We gotta have law an' order."

"I tell you what we ought to do, Tommy," said a voice. "Make me marshal *pro tem*."

Tommy looked in the general direction of the voice, but didn't see anything at first, the reason being the scanty height of the speaker. Shorty

Hanner was only about five feet five, and he was overlooked more often than he was seen.

"You?" asked Tommy.

"Me," said Shorty. "And one crack about a six-gun being bigger than I am, and I'll throw a bottle through your bar mirror."

Since that would have hurt Tommy more than a punch on the nose, Tommy said something different. "But have you had any experience?"

"A six-gun makes a little man just as good as a big man," said Shorty. "I'm going to carry two guns, which will make me twice as good."

Wild Bill Hickok and several other old-timers carried two guns. They had grown up in the era of the cap-and-ball revolver, before cartridges were invented. It took a little time to reload a muzzle-loading revolver and so people who were apt to need more than six shots in attending to whatever business needed attention, carried two guns. Even after cartridges were invented, some of these gents continued to carry two guns, just to even up the weight on each side.

But in Shorty's day, nobody carried two guns unless he wanted to look tougher than he really was. And it was a plain invitation for a real tough hombre to try to shoot one of them off you.

"We won't decide anything tonight," said Tommy. "I'll get the City Council together tomorrow morning."

THE WAGNER city councilmen had the best-looking mustaches in town, whether they had anything else or not. They didn't have much to do except to agree or disagree when somebody asked for something. If it didn't cost anything and if it took no hide off any of the council members they agreed. Otherwise they said no. Mostly they didn't do anything, because nobody asked for any favors in Wagner.

When Tommy Gander called a meeting to select an Acting Marshal, they all showed up. There was Phiz Elder, who ran the livery and corral; Homer Reilly, who owned the General Store; and Rock Matthews, the

hardware merchant. Except that some were taller, some shorter, some thicker and some thinner, they were all about alike. That is, they all pretended to be civic-minded and in favor of law and order, but really were scared to death. All except Tommy, and he wasn't much less scared.

A lot of people dropped around, just to watch the proceedings. Tommy explained that the Marshal had stopped a slug the night before and that Gopher Jackson had promised to return tonight. "And," Tommy added, "from the amount he'd been drinking, I'd say he'd be in worse humor."

"Harrumph," said Phiz Elder.

"He smashed a winder in my store," said Homer. "I think he should be arrested and forced to pay. Not only for the window, but for the manikin and—er—" he looked sheepishly around to make sure no ladies were present "—ah—six thundermugs."

"Who's gonna arrest him?" asked Rock Matthews, a little timidly, lest somebody suggest he do it himself.

"We have one application for Acting Marshal," said Tommy.

"Who?" asked Phiz.

"Me," said Shorty Hanner, who was seated in the council chamber, which is a dance hall above the hardware store on Saturday night.

"You?" asked Rocky Matthews, looking through his bifocals at Shorty. "You ain't big enough to reach the top of Tommy's bar."

"This is no time for levity, young feller," said Homer. "There has been a breach of the peace and the culprit must be punished."

"I ought to point out," said Tommy, "that we don't have any other applications."

"I don't want to be guilty of sending Shorty Hanner to his death," said Rock. "It might be a better idea to elect Gopher Jackson temporary marshal. Then maybe somebody would shoot him."

"Then who'd pay for my window, the manikin, and six thundermugs?" asked Homer.

"What's his qualifications?" Phiz wanted to know.

Tommy looked at Shorty. "Shorty

is a two-gun man," he said. "He claims that if one gun makes all men equal, two guns will make him twice as good as Gopher Jackson."

Phiz squinted through his bifocals again. "It ain't how many guns you got, son. It's what you do with 'em."

"I know," said Shorty.

"So what can you do? Can you shoot?"

"Nope."

The mayor and councilmen exchanged glances. "Gopher is a pretty good shot," said the Mayor. "Quick on the draw too."

"He shot the nose right off—"

"Yes, I know," said Shorty. "I ain't that good."

"If you tried to stand up against Gopher Jackson, you'd wind up under six feet of sod on Boot Hill," warned Tommy.

"I don't figger it that way," said Shorty. "Might be the other way around."

"Either you're crazy or we ain't been around long enough to see everything," said Rock. "Mind explainin' just how you figger?"

"Sure, I'll tell," said Shorty. "People are always strainin' themselves to act different from what they really are, and I figger we've got Gopher Jackson pegged wrong."

Homer Reilly laughed. "Oh, sure. Goph is about the most upstandin' gentleman that ever planted a man in Boot Hill. About a dozen corpses ought to be glad he plugged 'em."

"What I mean," said Shorty, disregarding Mr. Reilly's sarcasm, is that Gopher Jackson is human and we ain't. Man's a natural born pig, who'll lie and rob and steal and kill, but he's tryin' like almighty sunrise to different. Now I ain't never killed anybody, and I wouldn't kill nobody out of pure cussedness, but if I have to kill Gopher Jackson I'll do it by bein' just as mean and low-down as he is."

"Looks like you've got Gopher pegged right, instead of wrong," said Homer. "I knew all along he was a varmint."

"No," said Shorty, "we had him pegged for a varmint, while he's human."

"And I suppose we're varmints?"

"Nope," said Shorty. "We're dad-blamed hypocrites."

"Just for that, young man," said Homer, "I'm going to vote against naming you Temporary City Marshal."

"I'm going to vote for it," said Phiz. "It'll serve him right to get shot up a little."

"Me too," said Rock.

And so Two-Gun Shorty Hanner was named Marshal *pro tem* of Wagner and he had a date that night to meet Gopher Jackson, the meanest man in the county...

IT WAS A very hot night, but it seemed likely that one or more persons would go where it was even hotter before the night was through.

Out at his ranch Gopher Jackson was trying to kill his hangover by drinking more tequila. The sun hadn't been set too long before he saddled up and headed for Wagner.

He might not have remembered his threat to knock over the successor to the marshal he'd shot the night before, but it didn't make any difference. Most of the town knew about it and everybody would have felt like a bunch of cowards if somebody hadn't pinned a star on Shorty Ranner's chest and sent him out to face almost certain doom.

Shorty had a gun on each hip, carried low and strapped down so that he looked like a gunman, whether he was one or not. He had so much weight below his waist that it looked like it would take a battery of field pieces to knock him down.

In the door of his saloon, Tommy Gander watched for the swirl of dust that would herald the approach of Gopher Jackson. Shorty stood at the bar. He was really tall enough to look over the top of the bar, in spite of Rock Matthew's statement.

Seated at a table, looking like a party that had come to attend a wake, sat Rock, Homer Reilly and Phiz Elder. They'd all ordered whiskey, but none of them felt like drinking, which was unusual, if not unique.

A coyote howl sounded outside.

Tommy turned away from the door. "Here he comes," he said.

Shorty hitched up his twin six-

guns. "Invite him in for a drink," he said. "I'll arrest him when he comes in."

"Might be better if you snuck up behind him," suggested Rock.

"That would be cowardly," said Shorty.

"Well," said Homer, "it would be human. I thought you said—"

"Do you reckon Gopher Jackson would try to sneak up on me?" asked Shorty. Nobody answered, because that was about the most ridiculous idea anybody could have. Gopher Jackson was afraid of nobody who was smaller than he was.

Goph brought his horse to a stop outside the saloon.

He dismounted and looked at Tommy standing in the doorway.

"Where's the new marshal?"

Tommy made a pretense of looking up and down the street. "I don't see him," he said. "What's the use of shootin' him, Goph? Why don't you come in and have a drink?"

"Got any tequila?" Gopher asked.

"No, but what I have is on the house—to you," said Tommy, which was one of the biggest and most civic-minded things Tommy had done in a long while.

Goph licked his lips. "Usually I prefer tequila to red-eye," he said. "But so long as it's free—"

He strode across the board sidewalk, pushed past Tommy, and entered the saloon.

FOR A MOMENT he blinked, adjusting his eyes to the glare of lamplight in the saloon. Then he focused on a tin six-pointed star that Shorty wore on his chest.

From the star, Goph's eyes traveled downward to the twin six-guns hanging from Shorty's belt.

He blinked his eyes and then his ugly mouth cracked into a grin. He split the air with a loud guffaw. "I'll be damned, confounded damned," he said. "It's the funniest joke I ever saw."

"Gopher Jackson," said Shorty solemnly, "you're under arrest, for carrying unconcealed weapons, for discharging firearms unlawfully within the limits of town, and for disorderly conduct, drunkenness, and dis-

turbing the peace." He paused. "And if that ain't enough, I'll charge you with assault with a deadly weapon with intent to kill, in connection with the shooting up of our city marshal."

Gopher couldn't keep his face straight. "You're so damn crazy-lookin'," he said, "I sort of hate to feed any lead into you?"

"Put up your hands," said Shorty.

Shorty was standing at right angles to the bar. His arms had been at his sides, but now he lifted them and folded them across his chest, which was a damfool stunt because he should have had at least one hand within quick reach of one of his guns.

"Listen, sonny," said Gopher, "I'm a bad hombre to play jokes with. Before you could wiggle either one of those cannons in its holster, I could plug you. And unless you run along, I'm gonna do it."

Along the bar, men were moving out of the way of any stray bullets and this was the only sound in the whole saloon.

"Make your play," said Shorty. "I don't want it said that I shot a defenseless man."

As he spoke, Shorty turned sort of sideways, which was the first smart thing he'd done, in the opinion of most of the men who watched. Because being sideways made Shorty a smaller target, although in the case of a sure shot like Gopher Jackson it really didn't matter.

"I guess I'll just crease your scalp," said Gopher.

His hand blurred as it went down toward his single gun, but he never pulled the trigger. There was a blast and a little round red spot appeared right in Gopher Jackson's forehead.

He was dead before he hit the floor.

Shorty unfolded his arms, holding a derringer in his right hand. "Shucks," he said "I didn't mean to kill him. I only wanted to part his hair."

Tommy wiped his brow. "A three-gun man," he whispered.

"You don't call *this* a gun," said Shorty, holding up the derringer. "It ain't much more than a trigger."

Phiz Elder shook his head. "Big stuff sometimes comes in small quantities," he said. ●END

SATAN'S SEGUNDO

CHAPTER

1

Warning

DANE ROSS woke with his alarm clock beating a metallic refrain into the silence. He dressed in the cold dawn and hurried through his chores, the fear and worry that had been increasing in him for months making him so jumpy that the slightest noise brought him upright and sent stabbing pains knifing through his middle. Dane was not a nervous man, nor was he given to worry, but responsibility lay heavily upon him, for he was acutely aware

that what he did today would decide his and his neighbor's future.

It had started more than a year ago when Todd Blake, owner of the great Cross 7, set out to clear the little ranchers off the upper half of Buck River. Not that Blake needed the range. Not that he had any real reason for disliking or fearing the little fellows. There had been no rustling, no outlawry of any kind, no bloodshed until Tommy Gaddis had shot Mel Mayer on Piute's Main Street two weeks before. But the explanation of Todd Blake's actions was simple enough. It was the old principle of much demanding more, of Blake

The slug splintered the floor beside Dane's head.



who was strong taking advantage of the upper valley men who were weak.

If it had not been for Dane Ross, Blake would have had his way months before, for it had been Dane who had openly defied the Cross 7 owner in Piute and told him to go for his gun. Blake had passed it off, for it was cheaper and safer, according to his standards, to hire men to fight than to chance dying himself. Still, he was not one to forget that he had been humiliated, and this would be his day for remembering. Today ended Tommy Gaddis' trial, and his fate would be a major test of Todd Blake's power.

Dane's leadership was more than a matter of courage. Some men are born to lead and some to follow, and Dane was one of the former, for he was the solid kind of man who was respected by every rancher on the upper river from his friend, brash Steve

Purdy, on down to somber Lorn Freed who had lost his family in a typhoid epidemic the year before. It was Dane who had organized the Buck River Pool; it was Dane who had persuaded every man on the upper river to sign a pledge that he would not sell to Todd Blake unless he had permission from the others.

So the weak had become strong and set Blake and his Cross 7 hands back on their collective heels, and Dane Ross was responsible for it. The Pool's resistance had been effective until Mel Mayer, the weak link in the chain, had sold out to Todd Blake and young Gaddis had gunned him down for it. Now the fat was in the fire, for the upper valley men had sworn that Gaddis would not hang no matter what the jury decided.

The sun was showing above the Blue Mountains when Dane returned to the house and cooked breakfast.

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**TIME-HONORED
WESTERN CLASSIC
BOOK-LENGTH
★ NOVEL ★**

by
**WAYNE D.
OVERHOLSER**



There'd been no rustling, no outlawry of any kind, until one of the valley men shot a neighbor for selling out to Todd Blake . . .

After he had finished eating, he heated water and shaved, his mind on the day that lay before him, and a sense of hopelessness washed through him. He had been responsible for the resistance to Blake, and so he would be responsible for the bloodshed that came from it. He thought of Steve Purdy who had the next ranch upstream from him, and the sense of hopelessness deepened. That was where the trouble would come, for Steve was a hothead who talked first and thought second. It would not take much hot talk today to set it off.

Then he thought of Sue Blake, Todd's adopted daughter, and for some reason which he did not understand, the tension in him began to ease. Perhaps there was no reason at all. It was just that thinking of Sue was a pleasant escape from the thoughts of violence that shadowed the day. He loved Sue, but he had little reason to think she felt the same way about him, for she had broken things off between them three months before.

DANE PUT on a clean shirt and buckled his gun belt around him, thinking of the last time he had kissed Sue. He had been taking her to dances for a good part of a year, and although Todd Blake had not forbidden him to come on Cross 7 range, the big cowman had made it clear that it was an armed truce only as far as it concerned Sue. That was the reason he had not proposed. His own future had been too uncertain in the face of Cross 7's expansion, but he had thought she understood how he felt.

The break had come in late spring after Dane had brought Sue home from a dance. She had sat close to him in the buggy, her hand in his. There was little talk between them, for both knew what was ahead. Sooner or later, it would come to the shooting stage.

Every one of those last moments he had been with Sue held warm memories that he cherished. He remembered standing with her under the locust trees, her face upturned to

his; he remembered the warm wind, sage-sweet, breathing in from the desert, the moon and the great sweep of the stars overhead. Then he had kissed her and she had responded with a fervency that surprised him. He had felt a sort of frantic urgency in her lips as if she knew this was the last time she would ever kiss him, perhaps the last time she would see him. Then she had whirled and had run into the house. He had not seen her again until Tommy Gaddis' trial started.

Dane put on his hat and went outside. He caught up his horse and saddled, tension working into him again. It would help if he knew why she had turned from him that time, why she had not answered his letters, why she had looked away when he had tried to catch her eyes during the trial. But he had no answer to any of those questions. He swung into the saddle and rode out of his yard. Instantly, he reined up, his breath sawing out of him. Sue Blake was riding toward him in a gallop.

Dane stepped down and waited in the middle of the road, trying to understand Sue's presence, and failing. At first it seemed a miracle that she would be here at the very moment he was thinking of her. Then he knew it was no miracle, for he was thinking of her most of the time, but he was sure of one thing. It had taken something big to bring her this far from Cross 7 range. She saw him and waved, and a moment later pulled up beside him, dust rising to hang motionless in the idle air.

"Dane, I was afraid I'd miss you. Dad would kill me if he knew I was here. He thinks I came up the river to see Jenny Breen."

He reached up and gripped her hand. "Come down here where I can see you."

"I've got to go on. Dad and Hullinger will be along in a minute, and I don't dare let them find me."

He frowned, thinking that it was almost as hard to believe that Blake and Hullinger were on their way to see him as it was to believe that Sue was here with him. Hullinger was the sheriff, and like most of the county officials, owed his job to Todd Blake.

It was a perfect arrangement for both because Hullinger was the kind who liked authority, and he was not one to forget his debt to Cross 7.

"I'll be here," Dane said, and this time when he gripped her hand, she stumbled out of the saddle into his arms.

HE STARED at her a moment, satisfying a hunger that had long been in him. She was not as beautiful, he thought, as her foster sister Cherry; her features were not as perfect, but she suited him. He put a tip of his finger on her nose that was a little on the pug side, closed one eye with his finger, then the other, and kissed her. Again he felt that wild sense of urgency in her as if this was the last moment they would have together.

She pulled away from him. "Dane, Dane, I didn't come here for that, and I haven't got time..."

"I love you," he said. "You're going to listen. I thought you knew, but you ran away from me that night. You haven't answered my letters. You wouldn't look at me..."

"Dane, be still. I didn't get any letters from you, and I haven't got time to tell you why I ran away. Just trust me. I came to warn you because there wasn't anyone I could send. When Tommy Gaddis shot Mel Mayer, he played into Dad's hands. They'll convict him and they'll hang him."

"I don't reckon they will," Dane said grimly. "That's the one thing we won't let 'em do."

"Don't you see you can't interfere? Dane, can't you see—Hullinger is the law. If you break Gaddis out of jail or take him away from Hullinger today, you'll make outlaws out of yourselves. That's what Dad wants."

He looked down at her somberly, realizing the truth of this. He said heavily, "I hope it won't come to that. Weston is the only one left to testify. I reckon what he says will swing it one way or the other."

"He'll put a rope on Gaddis' neck," Sue hurried on. "I don't know what Dad and Cherry have done, but they're terribly confident. That's why I came. Don't let Steve Purdy or any of the others start trouble. Tomorrow I'm twenty-one. Then I'll have as

much to say about running Cross 7 as Dad."

"How's that?"

"It's a long story." She looked nervously down the road and turned back to him. "I own half of Cross 7. When I'm twenty-one, I can run my half and I won't stand for this crowding that's making all the trouble. I've told him I won't. Now your job is to keep your friends in line today."

"How did you ever get half..."

"I haven't got time to tell you." She stepped back into the saddle. "I've got to go. If I don't show up at Jenny Breen's, Dad will know I was here. Don't have trouble with him, Dane. Or Hullinger, either."

She waved and smiled, and turning her horse, reined him off the road and into the willows along the river. He watched her splash across and ride the screen on the south bank. Then she was gone from sight. The Breen place was three miles from Dane's at the foot of the valley wall. If Blake and Hullinger followed the road, they would not see her.

Dane rode back to his cabin and swung down. Todd Blake was worried about something, or he wouldn't be coming here this early in the morning. He would know that Dane would be in town by the time the trial started. Then Dane's thoughts turned to Sue's startling statement that she owned half of Cross 7. That was as hard to believe as the rest of the things that were happening this morning. Sue had never told him about it before and Todd Blake had never intimated anything of the sort to anyone in the valley. But even if it was true and Sue could prove her claim Dane doubted that it would make any difference. Blake was a stubborn man, and it was not likely that a slip of a girl could influence his actions.

CHAPTER

2

The Visit

BLAKE AND Hullinger rode in a few minutes after Sue had left. Blake was a fat man who sat slumped in his saddle, droopy-cheeked face showing the punishment the ride had given him. He said,

"Howdy, Dane," and laboriously eased out of the saddle. He walked over to the horse trough, took a drink from the pipe that brought water from the cabin, and washed his face. He came back to where Dane hunkered in front of the corral gate. "Damned hot for this early in the year."

Dane said, "Yeah," and kept his eyes on Hullinger. It was the first time he had ever seen the man without a gun, and it worried him. There seemed to be only one explanation. Hullinger didn't want gun trouble. But that didn't make sense. They had some kind of a squeeze up their sleeves, or they wouldn't be here.

Hullinger was a big man, taller than Dane and thicker of shoulders and arms. He wore a bushy black mustache that gave him a fierce piratical appearance; his black eyes glittered under arching black brows. He liked to strut and blow, and behind that facade was a depth of sadistic cruelty that Dane had seen demonstrated more than once. Dane was not a man given to hating, but he hated Ed Hullinger. There was nothing about the man that qualified him for the sheriff's job.

"You ain't real hospitable," Blake complained.

"I don't recollect that you ever invited me into your house," Dane said pointedly. "What's more, I figger you're the cause of Sue shying away from me."

Hullinger had stayed in the saddle. Now he stepped down, breathing heavily. He said, "I told you talking to this hombre is a waste of time, Todd. I'd just as soon whittle him down now as later."

Dane rose. "You're as big as a horse, but you never saw the day you could whittle me down."

"Dry up, you two," Blake cut in. "We ain't here to fight. If you don't want us cluttering up your fine house, we'll gab outside."

"You must have a lot to gab about, or you wouldn't be here," Dane said. "You've bottled us up and given us warning that you'd drill any member of the Pool you found on your range. You've put every pressure on us you could to make us sell, and now you're

fixing to hang Tommy Gaddis. If Steve Purdy rides along here and finds you, he'll drill you sure."

"Then he'll hang," Hullinger said coldly. "Before this is over, I've got a hunch we'll be hanging more'n Tommy Gaddis, which same includes you."

"Unless he's smart," Blake said placidly.

Hullinger snorted. "He ain't smart. Gets proddy as soon as we ride in."

"Anything surprising in that?" Dane snapped. "What'd happen if a couple of us rode in to Cross?"

"We've got a deal for you," Blake said, ignoring Dane's question.

"I ain't interested if it don't mean freeing Tommy Gaddis."

"This concerns you," Blake explained. "And Sue. You're right that I'm to blame for keeping you apart, but if you've got savvy enough to see my way, I'll give my blessing to your wedding."

"I'll listen," Dane said.

Blake's moonlike face showed his pleasure. "I knew you were smart. Fact is, I always saw a lot of promise in you. Too bad you got lined up on the other side."

Hullinger grunted an oath. He stood with his hands at his sides, scowling, wanting to fight, and Dane guessed that the only thing holding him back was Blake's previously given orders.

"Too bad you young folks who are in love can't get together," Blake went on smoothly. "Sue says you ain't engaged, but if it wasn't for our little differences you would be. Sue's a fine girl. Mighty fine, and she'd make a perfect wife for a rancher." He paused, bland eyes on Dane. "Yes sir, perfect if her husband was raising beef a couple of hundred miles from here, say Wallowa county."

Dane began to see it then. He said directly, "You're taking a long time getting around to the deal."

"Why, I didn't think I was taking so long. We've got lots of time, I reckon. My idea was that you ride off with Sue and leave this little two-bit outfit you've got. I reckon Sue'll go along and you can get married somewhere. The Dalles, say. You can

buy a real outfit up around Enterprize."

Dane laughed as if he didn't see what Blake was getting at. "Yeah, a real outfit. Right now I've got three silver dollars and a four-bit piece in my pocket. That'd buy quite a spread, wouldn't it?"

"I'd give Sue a generous wedding present. Say, five thousand."

Todd Blake was smarter than Dane had given him credit for. He knew that Dane would not sell out as Mel Mayer had done, and he knew that threats would not do the job, but he also knew that Sue was Dane's weakness. In spite of himself, Dane felt the lure of Todd Blake's offer.

THERE HAD been little happiness in life for Dane Ross. He had not even had the freedom of a normal boyhood, for circumstances had forced manhood upon him when he was fifteen. Actually there was little to hold him here on Buck River. A cow outfit that never would amount to much. Neighbors who respected him now and might despise him by sundown. Hot-tempered Steve Purdy would resent any attempt Dane made to restrain him. More than once he had put out wild talk about attacking Cross 7, killing everybody there and torching the buildings.

In this brief moment of silence Dane mentally weighed Blake's offer. There could be only one answer. If he accepted it, he would lose Sue, for taking it would be a coward's way, and Sue Blake had no use for cowards. But there was more to it than that. Dane would have no use for himself. The Buck River Pool had been his idea; united resistance had been his idea, so in a way he had been responsible for Mel Mayer's shooting, and in that same way he would be responsible for what happened to Tommy Gaddis.

"Nothing doing, Todd," Dane said finally. "We'll play it out."

Hullinger took a step toward him. "Hang it, Todd, there's only one thing that a fool like this understands."

Dane's eyes fixed on the sheriff. Suddenly he understood. Ed Hullinger had not come up here as a law-

man. He was here because he was Todd Blake's man, body and soul, one man Blake could completely trust. That was the game, to lure him out of the country so the Buck River men would be leaderless, but if the lure didn't work, Hullinger would beat him into the dirt. Dane knew how the man fought. Some of his victims had died from internal injuries; others had never walked again.

"Wait, Ed." Blake probed Dane with his eyes, the blandness giving way to irritation. "Let's look at our cards, son. I never lose. You know that. And I'll tell you why I don't lose. I never bet on a big pot until I've got a pat hand. Tommy Gaddis hangs. You and me know what that'll do with a hair-brained fool like Steve Purdy talking fight all the time. Now Sue ain't my own girl, but I've raised her and I've loved her like she was. She wants you. Ain't no doubt of that. So I'd like for you and her to get out of the valley before things blow up. I'll make that wedding present ten thousand."

Again the Cross 7 owner's round face was as bland as a baby's. The sight of it brought a short laugh out of Dane. He was the one who might hold his neighbors back, might control Steve Purdy. If Sue had it right, the thing Todd Blake wanted above everything else was for the upper valley men to start the fight.

"You don't fool me none, Todd," Dane said. "I guess it would be worth ten thousand to get me out of the country today. Now I'm going to town to hear what Weston's got to say, and if he's lying for you, I'll whittle him down to size."

Blake said, "All right, Ed," and before the words were out of his mouth, Hullinger drove at Dane.

If it had been a matter of swapping lead, Dane would have had nothing to worry about, for he did not doubt his superior gun speed, but Hullinger had left his gun at home. Dane had sensed Hullinger's hunger for a fight. Still, he had not expected it to come like this.

Dane jumped back, stumbled and fell. There was a sharp run of panic through him. It was Hullinger's way to fall on a man when he was down

and break his ribs, or kick him with his heavy cowhide boots. Dane rolled, cat-like, and felt Hullinger's boot stir his shirt, barely scraping his side. He bounced up, taunting, "You're slowing up, Ed. You're getting old."

Hullinger bawled an oath and came in again, but Dane was a faster man. He slid away, an elusive target that Hullinger could not quite locate. He caught the man on the mouth and brought a rush of blood, swung another right that rocked the lawman's big head. Then he danced away, saying, "How do you like it, Ed?"

"Stand back, Ed," Blake called in a raging fury. "I'll finish it."

TODD BLAKE aimed to shoot him down. Only then did Dane understand how desperate the Cross 7 owner had become, how much depended on Dane Ross being held out of the day's troubles. But Hullinger, his pride hurt, was after Dane again. For a moment they stood together, fists swinging, the meaty sounds of fists on bone ringing across the barnyard. Through it came Blake's voice, "Get away, damn it. Ed, get away."

Hullinger had never had a smaller man stand up to him like this, and it bothered him. Or it might have been his physical softness beginning to tell on him, for he was a hard drinking man and he had not done a day's work since Blake had given him the star. But whatever the reason, he was blowing hard, he had lost his timing, and his blows were more like the awkward swings of great clubs than the punches of a man with Hullinger's reputation.

Dane saw the hurt look creep into the sheriff's face. His mouth had sprung open, one eye was swelling shut. He let his arms go down and took a step back, a long ragged breath sawing out of him. Dane thought, "He's playing possum." He had glimpsed Blake standing close to the corral gate, gun in his hand. Now Dane cried out, "You're finished, Ed. I'll bust that big nose of yours," but instead of following Hullinger, he swung in a quick half turn and slammed into Blake. The gun went off, a wild shot high over Dane's head. Then Dane hammered a fist

into Blake's soft belly, heard the gusty sigh of breath leaving him, and stepping back, drew his gun.

"That's it," Dane said sharply.

Hullinger had started forward. He stopped, surprise touching him. Blake, still laboring for breath, stooped and picked up his gun. Dane said, "When you boys come to do a job like this, better bring your crew along. Ed's been living too soft, Todd. Maybe you need to hire a new sheriff."

Blake waddled across the yard to his horse and pulled himself into the saddle. Then he said, "From now on you'll get the same as the rest."

"I expect that," Dane said.

Hullinger felt of his battered mouth, black eyes brooding. "Sonny, don't think you had me licked. If you're still alive when this is over, we'll finish it."

But Dane's eyes were still on Blake. Ignoring Hullinger, he said, "I'll marry Sue, Todd, if she'll have me. Don't try to stop us. She said she didn't get my letters, and I've written..."

"So," Blake said, "she's been here."

He lifted his reins and started to turn his horse. Then he added, "Don't pay no attention to anything Sue said about owning part of Cross 7. She just imagined that."

THEY RODE off then, Hullinger feeling of his mouth again. Dane went over to the horse trough and sloshed his face with water. He had been hit more times than he had realized. Now he was tired and he hurt in a dozen places where Hullinger's big fists had struck him. But he felt better. The nervous tension was gone, he wasn't jumpy. The waiting and wondering, expecting something that never quite happened; all that was behind him. Violence, long threatened, would sweep Buck River. The question was strategy now, and timing, of holding Steve Purdy and the others back until Blake gave them an opening.

Dane sat down on the end of the log trough and rolled a smoke. Most of the upper valley men had wives and children. Dane and Steve Purdy were bachelors. Lorn Freed was a

widower. That, Dane saw with striking clarity, was where the question of strategy came in. Somehow the three of them had to beat Cross 7. It would be no victory at all if that victory meant that most of the valley kids were made orphans, the valley wives made widows. Yet every man on the river would insist, regardless of family, that he be given his chance to share in the fighting. Dane finished his cigarette and flipped the stub into the dust. Only time would bring a solution to this problem, and time was running out.

CHAPTER

3

Lying Witness

AS DANE reined into the road again, he heard Steve Purdy's yell, and waited until Purdy came up to him. "Damned bulls got loose," Purdy said, "or I'd have been along sooner." He noticed Dane's face then, and asked, "Get your mug mixed up with your meat grinder?"

"No. Hullinger."

"What the devil. That ornery son wasn't out here, was he?"

"Him and Blake, too." Dane told him about it, holding back only the fact that Sue had been there before them. Purdy listened, his face darkening with anger. When Dane finished, Purdy said, "Now maybe you'll see it's either gotta be us or them. If you'd taken my advice and wiped Cross 7 out..."

"We'd be in jail or dead. No, Steve, that wasn't the way."

Purdy patted his gun butt. "For once you're singing the wrong tune, mister. Leave it to me. I ain't afraid of Fatty Blake and I ain't soft on one of his girls, either."

Anger stirred in Dane. At times he wondered why he thought of Purdy as his friend. Purdy was twenty-five, almost Dane's age, but he was slender with a boy's eager blue eyes and pink-cheeked face that made him look years younger than Dane. In many ways they were opposites. Dane was a blocky man, medium tall, with dust-colored hair and gray eyes. Worry lines in his face gave him the appearance of being older than he was. That was something Purdy could not understand, for he never worried about

anything and he saw no sense in anyone else worrying. To him no problem was difficult. Gunsmoke could settle anything, and if he had had any following among the upper valley men, there would have been an attack on Cross 7 long ago, and Blake would have had the excuse he sought to clear the upper valley of the small ranchers.

Still, there were many things about Steve Purdy that Dane liked. He was a hard worker and a good neighbor, he was loyal, and he was honest. He had swapped work with Dane from the time he had come to Buck River, and he would drop anything he was doing if Dane asked for help. When this trouble with Cross 7 was over, they would find again their old friendly relationship, but now the bald intimation that he was afraid of Blake and that his feeling for Sue influenced his actions rankled in Dane.

"I tell you there just ain't room for us and that thieving Blake on the same range," Purdy burst out. "The ornery son has to tie his hands to the bedposts when he goes to sleep, or he'd rob himself during the night."

Still Dane said nothing. There was no use honing his temper to a fine edge on Purdy now. He would have plenty of chance after he got to town.

They rode into Piute, Dane buried in his own thoughts, and Purdy inwardly sour because he had failed to get a rise out of Dane. The river made a sweeping meander here, and the town had grown up on the tip of the turn. Beyond Piute in the center of the lush valley stood the Cross 7 buildings. Blake had brought his herd in years ago over the Cascades from the Willamette Valley, and because he was the first here, he had picked the choicest spot. The others who had come later had to choose between the narrow up-river valley where the summers were shorter and the soil less fertile, or the waterless desert to the south and west.

Blake liked to say that he had had no idea that he would prosper the way he had, or he would have claimed the upper valley from the first. Now that his herds had grown beyond his wildest dreams, he needed the high

country for his summer range. It was an excuse, Dane knew. Nothing more.

DANE AND PURDY dismounted in front of the Starlight Saloon, racked their horses, and went in. The rest of the upper valley men were there, and as the batwings parted, several yelled, "Where've you been?"

"Sleeping," Dane said.

"Looks like you had a rough nightmare," Lorn Freed said.

"Licked daylight out of Ed Hullinger," Purdy cried. "Go on. Tell 'em."

Quickly Dane told them about Blake's and Hullinger's visit. "Might be old Todd's worried some," he said then. "If Curt Weston tells the truth, the jury won't be five minutes. Then Todd'll find out he can't swing things as easy as he figgers."

Dane knew it wouldn't be that way, but the only thing he could hope to accomplish today was to hold his friends back. The middle ground was their best course, to stand on their rights and resist, but not to be drawn into making an attack. That had been Dane's policy from the first, and so he could see the wisdom in Sue's warning that morning about making outlaws of themselves. Now, looking around the half circle of faces before him, he saw doubt and rebellion.

"I hope you're right," Lorn Freed said in his sober tone.

Purdy had gone over to the bar and poured himself a drink. "You know damned well how it'll go with the sheriff and judge on Blake's side." He lifted his glass and stared solemnly at the amber liquid. "To justice as Judge Yord sees it, and to Mr. Colt if Yord don't see it right."

"You can forget your friend Colt," Dane said sharply.

"Now I doubt that I will." Purdy downed his drink and set the glass on the bar. "Yes sir, I think my friend Colt is going to speak his piece about the time that jury comes in."

A man at a front window called, "Blake's leaving the hotel."

Dane moved quickly to the batwings and swung to face his friends. He said, "No gun work. If there's going to be any smoke swapping, let them start it."

They looked at him, honest men whose faces showed the same worry lines that Dane's held, good men who wanted nothing from life but the peace and justice that a fair government would give them. But nothing Dane had said eased the tension in them.

"Tommy Gaddis is my neighbor," gaunt Lorn Fred said. "He's young. Maybe a mite wild, but he's square. If we hadn't all done some wild talking about what we were going to do to Mel Mayer for selling out, Tommy wouldn't have plugged him, so by heaven, I won't see him hanged."

They nodded, and Steve Purdy, raising another filled glass, said bitterly, "Here's to Todd Blake and Judge Yord and Sheriff Hullinger. May the devil hang 'em in all hades together."

Dane turned into the street, the others following. They lined the boardwalk in front of the saloon and watched cocky little Judge Yord come out of the Casino at the other end of the block and fall into step beside Todd Blake. Both Cherry and Sue Blake were behind him and Yord. Relief washed through Dane when he saw Sue. She must have made a brief visit with Jenny Breen and got back to town ahead of Blake. Sue gave no indication that she saw Dane, but Cherry looked directly at him and nodded, her red lips giving him a smile.

THEY MOVED toward the courthouse, Yord and Blake ignoring the upper valley men. When they had gone on, Purdy said maliciously, "Hanged if that Cherry gal didn't look like she wanted Dane."

"She did for a fact," Freed said. "We'd be in a devil of a fix if they got Dane on their side."

"Don't hold your breath till that happens," Dane growled, and turned toward the courthouse.

Hullinger was bringing young Gaddis from the jail when Dane and the others reached the courthouse yard. Hullinger saw them and pulled his prisoner to a stop under the locust trees that formed a rectangle around the block.

When the upper valley men reached

him, Hullinger said with unnecessary belligerence. "We'll get the verdict today, maybe in a few minutes. I don't want no trouble whichever way it goes."

Purdy laughed and slapped a leg. "Boys, look at Ed's mug. It never was purty, but look at it now."

Even somber Lorn Freed joined in the laugh. "Speaking of trouble, Ed, I heard Dane gave you some."

"Naw. He hit me when I wasn't looking," Hullinger said, trying to pass over it lightly, but there was no doubting the depth of his feeling for Dane as his black eyes swept the half circle of men before him.

"It was a whiskey bottle that hit him," Dane said. "He just gave out."

Tommy Gaddis laughed. He had been in jail for most of the two weeks since the shooting, but confinement in jail had taken none of his natural wildness from him. "You mean he hits the whiskey bottle, Dane. Talk about an easy life. Slapping Patty Blake on the back with one hand and holding to a bottle with the other is..."

"Shut up." Hullinger raised a fist to strike the boy.

Dane said, "You hunting real trouble, Ed?"

The lawman dropped his fist. His cheeks were always red, but now except for the purple bruises Dane's fists had given him they were scarlet as battered pride threw fuel on his rage. He breathed, "I'm aiming to have you in the calaboose by sundown, Ross. I'm warning you." Gripping Gaddis by the arm, he propelled him into the courthouse.

"His back sure makes a good target," Purdy said ominously.

"There's a better way than making outlaws out of ourselves," Dane said.

Purdy bowed to the men behind him. "We'll wait, gents. Then we'll wait some more. I reckon we'll be waiting in purgatory when Blake signs in."

"You'll beat him there if you don't quit thinking about that iron you're toting," Dane said sharply.

They moved along the hall and turning into the courtroom, stood with their backs to the wall. All the seats were taken, some filled with

townsmen who had come to see the show and the rest by Cross 7 hands who were there, waiting. Dane guessed, for the upper valley men to start trouble.

Curt Weston, the only remaining witness had a chair next to the railing. He owned one of the two stores in Piute, and because it was the store that the little ranchers patronized, Dane nursed a small hope that the man would tell the truth. Weston had been one of the first settlers in the valley freighting a load of whiskey and flour south from the Columbia and in later years when beef had been down he had carried Dane and Freed and the rest until their luck had turned and they'd paid their store bill. The trouble was that Todd Blake had several ways of swinging the men he needed when the chips were down and Dane could not guess whether Weston had the courage it took to stand against the pressure Blake had put into him.

JUDGE YORD was in front listening attentively to Todd Blake as if receiving his final instructions. Hullinger had hustled Tommy Gaddis to his seat in front, the lawyers were at their tables and the jury box was filled. This was it, Dane thought, tension gripping his stomach the moment that had been in his thoughts the instant the alarm clock had driven him up from the deep well of sleep that dawn.

Now within the next few minutes, Blake would make the final test of his power. If he could legally hang Tommy Gaddis for a killing that had resulted from a fair fight, he could find excuses to hang Dane or Lorn Freed or any of the others. For months Steve Purdy had prophesied that Blake would hire an army of gunslingers to clear the upper valley, but using Judge Yord and the law was simpler, cheaper, and safer.

Suddenly Yord wheeled away from Blake and took his seat on the platform. He pounded his desk with the butt of his six-gun and court was in session. Weston took the stand and was asked if he had seen Mel Mayer shot. Weston said yes, adding that

the prisoner had done the shooting. Weston had been standing in front of his store and had seen the whole affair.

The lawyer asked, "Who pulled first?"

Weston hesitated, gaze involuntarily turning to Dane and the others in the back of the room. He was nearly fifty, a slight gray man who had lived where fortunes had been made, but he had never made one himself. Dane, watching him closely, saw his lips press so tightly that they formed a single rigid line, saw his frown deepen as he brought his gaze back to the lawyer's face. Then, before Weston said another word, Dane sensed that they had lost. Weston had either sold out or been bluffed out, and his testimony would condemn Tommy Gaddis to the gallows.

"It wasn't a case of who pulled first," Weston said clearly. "Gaddis was cussing Mayer for selling to Todd Blake. Mayer started cussing back, saying it was his business what he did with his place, and to hell with the agreement Dane Ross had finagled out of him. Then Gaddis said Mayer wouldn't live long enough to sign the papers. He didn't draw a gun. He had one in his hand and he shot Mayer without giving Mayer a chance to draw."

"You're a liar," Tommy Gaddis jumped up and started for Weston. "It wasn't that way..."

Hullinger jerked Gaddis back and slammed him into his seat. "Don't do that no more," the sheriff bawled, "or I'll tie you down."

Judge Yord pounded his desk bawling, "Keep the prisoner where he belongs."

There was quiet then, a sudden ominous pool of quiet that could not be mistaken, the kind of sultry quiet that stings a man with his own sweat. Weston rose, eyes searching for Cherry Blake. He went on toward his chair back of the railing, walking in the lurching gait of a man deeply affected by some strong emotion.

Dane looked along the line of his friends and jerked his head at the door. They filed out behind him, none speaking until they were under the locusts. Then, Purdy said in a tone

unusually soft for him, "You said that if Weston told the truth, the jury wouldn't be out five minutes."

"I don't reckon they will be," Dane said tonelessly.

They were all looking at him, waiting for him to tell them what they should do, but there was nothing he could tell them. Not yet. He was not sure he could point the way even later. There was nothing to do but wait and hope that Blake would become impatient and force the issue in a way that would give them a chance to fight back legally.

"What do we do now, Dane?" Purdy prodded. "Keep on twiddling our thumbs while we wear out the seat of our pants?"

Lorn Freed said "You talk about the middle road, Dane. About holding Blake but not doing something that starts guns to smoking. You talk about law. Well I reckon we've seen what the law will do. Todd Blake's law."

Still Dane held his silence as he rolled a smoke. He knew how they felt because he felt the same. He liked Tommy Gaddis. Tommy had a mother who was waiting for him now in their little cabin high up in the Blue Mountains where Buck River was little more than a tumbling creek. She had no one but Tommy. Still, nothing was changed as far as the rest of them went. Dane fired his cigarette, masking the hopelessness that gripped him. As Freed had just said, this was Todd Blake's law, and anything they did to force justice upon the valley would put them outside the law.

IT WAS then that Dane, flipping the charred match into the street, raised his eyes and saw the tall stranger standing on the corner. He was a rail of a man with a sun-darkened face and a great beak of a nose, and he had the longest arms Dane had ever seen. He carried two guns, low and thonged down, and those guns branded him as clearly as Cross 7 branded Todd Blake's cattle. A gun-slick brought to the valley by Blake, Dane thought, an ace in the hole to buffalo the upper valley men if everything else failed.

Purdy and Freed and the others seeing Dan fix his gaze on someone, turned to look and Purdy swore bitterly. He said hoarsely, "It ain't enough for Blake to get witnesses to lie and bottle up up so we can't drive a herd out of the valley. He's got to bring in a killer."

"If we could prove that," Dane said thoughtfully, "we might have what we've been looking for."

"Look, Steve," Dane said the pressure of his feelings tightening his voice. "I think as much of Tommy as anybody, but I haven't lost my head so much I can't see what's coming if we bust the jail open and take Tommy out."

"I can see what's coming if we don't..." Purdy began.

"I sure thought you had more brains than you've got," Dane snapped. "We take Tommy and high-tail out of the valley, with Hullinger right behind us with a posse. From then on the law backs Blake against us. Maybe we hide out for awhile. Or maybe we get plumb away. Then what happens?"

"Blake takes over," Fred said bleakly. "Our spreads go for taxes and Blake buys 'em in. I've thought about it all right but it's better'n letting 'em string Tommy up."

"Chances are we could free Tommy the minute Hullinger brings him out of the courthouse," Dane said. "Then Hullinger would chase up plumb to the Snake River, and where would your wives and kids be." Dane shook his head. "I tell you it's got to be some other way."

"I've got no wife or kids," Steve Purdy said doggedly. "You ain't either, Dane."

Dane Ross nodded, catching Purdy's implication, and remembering what he had said earlier that morning about not being afraid of Fatty Blake and not being soft on one of his girls. But there was a difference between being so rash that he lost his life for no purpose, and waiting until some sort of an opening developed. The trouble was that Dane could see no course of action that would save young Tommy Gaddis and still keep the upper valley men from becoming outlaws.

Still they were watching Dane, waiting, hoping, but he said nothing, gaze on the tall gunman, Freed asked, "What other way is there at a time like this except making our guns talk for us?"

"I don't see any now," Dane said slowly. "I ain't against making our guns talk. I want to be sure we can do the job when we start." He flipped his cigarette stub into the dust. "What gets under my hide is that it was just plain luck that got Tommy and Mayer into a ruckus at this particular time."

"We all felt the same way about Mayer," Purdy said. "Tommy done what any of us would have done if we'd had the same chance."

"We've followed you, Dane," Lorn Freed said. "I can't say you've made any bad mistake. I'll admit as soon as the next man that if it hadn't been for you, Blake would have stampeded us into selling out when he first put the screws on us. Now it seems like you can't say nothing but wait. If we're gonna keep on following, we've got to see where we're going."

And Dane could only say, "I don't know."

CHAPTER

4

Gun Trap

JUDGE YORD and Todd Blake and several townsmen who belonged to Blake's crowd left the courthouse and turned the corner on Main Street. They were headed for the Casino, Dane knew, and they would stay there until the bailiff brought them word that jury had reached a verdict.

"They've got time for 'bout one drink," Purdy grunted.

The gunman remained on the corner, watching them. He stood absolutely still, making no hostile move of any kind, but his presence was a disturbance. None of the upper valley men talked. They smoked, moving around restlessly, or standing and kicking at the gray trodden dirt.

He was, Dane thought, the only one in the bunch who had killed a man. A few, like Steve Purdy, talked wild, but most of them were patient men who would go a long ways to avoid

trouble. Now Dane sensed that they had gone as far as they could. If Tommy Gaddis hanged, it would be after they had died trying to stop it.

The bailiff left the courthouse and hurried toward the Casino. Hullinger appeared in the doorway and called "Ross."

Purdy swung to face the lawman. He said, his words a cold challenge, "You try anything crooked. Hullinger, and I'll kill you."

"You sure talk a tough fight," Hullinger said contemptuously. "Come here, Ross."

Dane hesitated, not wanting to leave the others but knowing that he had already done what he could to stop trouble. He said, "Take it easy, Steve," and paced toward the sheriff.

"Ain't no doubt about the verdict," Hullinger said when Dane came up. "Not after what Weston had to say. You see, you were a damned fool for turning Todd down the way you did. Now all you've done is work yourself into a good licking which same I'm gonna give you."

"Is that what you called me over here for?"

"No. Todd wants you to get your boys out of town. If it was me, I'd dust 'em off with hot lead, but Todd don't want trouble in town where a lot of innocent people will get hurt. Do it now before the jury gets back in."

"They're not my boys," Dane said.

Hullinger shrugged and started to turn. Then, as if remembering, he swung back. "Oh Ross, Cherry wants to see you."

This time Hullinger completed his turn and tramped along the hall and into the courtroom. Again Dane hesitated knowing that the men under the locusts were watching him, and knowing that Cherry Blake would not want anything that would be good for either him or his friends. She was driven, he thought, by the same greedy and selfish motives that ruled her father, the difference between them being entirely superficial. Her body was slim and attractive instead of being droopy and repellent as was Todd Blake's.

Dane could not remember that Cherry had ever smiled at him until

this morning. She had some idea of using him and it might help if he found out what it was. Making up his mind, he turned down the hall and found Cherry waiting in the rear of the courtroom, black eyes bright with anticipation.

CHERRY BLAKE was the most beautiful woman he had ever seen. She put a slim hand on his arm, red lips smiling a little. She was tall and perfectly molded, proudly feminine and exciting and sure that she was capable of controlling any situation that could rise between her and a man.

Dane said, "You wanted me?"

She moved forward impulsively so that her breasts pressed against him.

She said, "Dane, they'll hang Tommy Gaddis. There's no doubt about his guilt, so Judge Yord can do only one thing."

"I guess Yord'll do one thing all right," Dane said, backing up a step.

"What I'm afraid of is that some of Gaddis' hothead friends will start trouble. You won't be one of them, will you?"

He backed away another step, sweat beading his forehead. He said, "Yes ma'am, that's exactly where I'll be."

Judge Yord and Blake and the others were taking their places and Dane was aware that Sue had turned in her seat and was watching him, interest sharp in her eyes.

"No, Dane, you wouldn't," Cherry was saying in her throaty persuasive voice. "You believe in law, don't you?"

"Not Cross 7 law," he said defiantly, his voice carrying to Todd Blake. "If it's got to be a fight, I'll do my part of the shooting."

She hooked her arm through his. "Let's sit down Dane. Maybe they won't find Gaddis guilty."

She would use him if she could, and she'd make a fool out of him while she did. Still he had to play along if he wanted to find out what she had in mind. He let Cherry lead him to a back seat and he dropped down beside her, afraid of this but determined to know the pattern of her scheming.

Sue was still looking back, watch-

ing Cherry and Dane, and it seemed to Dane that she was desperately trying to give him some sort of warning. Then Judge Yord had reached his desk and was pounding for order with the butt of his six-gun. When Sue turned back to face the front of the room, Dane still had no idea what was in her mind.

"Yord said, 'Saunders, did you reach a verdict?'"

The foreman of the jury rose. "That's what we done, Judge, and we didn't have much trouble getting to it."

"What is it?"

Saunders cleared his throat, obviously feeling the drama of the moment, the sudden importance which this situation had placed upon him. Curt Weston was slumped down in his seat, chin dipped to his chest. The townspeople were on edge, sensing the violence that had threatened this trial from the beginning. Suddenly it struck Dane that there had been no vacant seats in the courtroom when he had first come in with Lorn Freed and the rest of the upper valley ranchers, yet now he and Cherry had no trouble finding seats in the back of the room. Then he saw what had happened. *They were seats that had been occupied by Cross 7 buckaroos a few moments before.*

Dane leaned toward Cherry. "Where's your dad's men?"

Cherry was watching the jury foreman. She breathed, "Shhhhh."

Saunders cleared his throat again, visibly swelling under the spotlight that the situation had thrown upon him. He said, "Guilty, Judge. First degree, we figger."

Tommy Gaddis rose, tall and straight, his face white. For the first time he seemed to realize what was ahead for him. He cried, "Sure, go on and tell me you're going to hang me. That's what Fatty Blake wants. It's why Weston lied, but what's it gonna buy you, Yord?"

THE JUDGE pounded the desk with the butt of his six-gun, face crimson. "That kind of talk won't get you anywhere, Gaddis. You've had a fair trial and you've been found guilty by a jury of your peers. It is

my duty as judge of this here court to sentence you to hang by the neck until you're dead. May the Lord have mercy on your soul." Yord pounded the desk again, anger at Gaddis still staining his face. "Take him back to jail, Sheriff."

Cherry was squeezing Dane's hand. She breathed, "I kept hoping they wouldn't do that. He's so young and I guess his mother needs him, but he did murder Mel Mayer, so I shouldn't be sorry for him."

Her cheek was almost touching his. Her lips were parted; her eyelids seemed to be struggling to hold back the tears. Hullinger had his gun in his hand and was turning Tommy Gaddis toward the aisle. Dane's neighbors were packed in the doorway. Now they swung around and tramped down the hall and on out of the building, tall heels cracking pistol-sharp on the floor.

Sue jumped up as if on sudden impulse and ran down the aisle ahead of Hullinger and his prisoner. She stopped beside Dane and leaned over him toward Cherry. She said, "Loan me a handkerchief, Cherry. I guess I lost mine."

Cherry glared at Sue. For an instant Dane thought she was going to let her anger control her, and he knew from past experience that Cherry had a temper which brought her close to insanity at times. Now, as if remembering Dane was beside her, she forced a smile and said pleasantly enough, "Of course, Sue."

Dane felt like a man gripped by a wild and terrible nightmare, felt as if he were being swept into a swift chill stream and could not wake up to fight it. The absence of the Cross 7 buckaroos meant something, but Cherry had given him no clue.

Sue took Cherry's handkerchief and said, "Thank you," in a tone that was meant to be sweet. She drew back from Cherry and dropped the handkerchief. Dane stooped to pick it up. Sue said, "I'm sorry. I'll get it."

Their heads went down together, and for an instant Sue's mouth was close to his ear. She whispered, "Cross 7 is upstairs. They expect your friends to free Gaddis and

they'll shoot the minute trouble starts." She raised up suddenly, bumped Dane, and smiled ruefully as she rubbed the back of her head. "I'm sorry, Dane. I didn't know I was that clumsy." Turning quickly, she dropped into a seat in front of Dane.

Hullinger was bringing Tommy Gaddis up the aisle, his face white under the dark bruises, and Dane understood. If Todd Blake's plan worked, Ed Hullinger would be in the middle of a fight, and it was probable he would go down under a stray slug, for they would be singing across the courthouse yard in a matter of seconds unless Dane stopped it.

Cherry's face was ugly under the pressure of her rage. Still, she seemed puzzled as if uncertain what Sue had done. She must have sensed, in the brief moment it took Dane to make up his mind, that Sue had given the scheme away. She gripped Dane's arm with both hands, forcing herself to be gayly eager, "Oh, Dane, I want to tell you..." Dane yanked free, lifting Cherry from her chair and tumbling her against the seat and on to the floor. He wheeled into the aisle a step ahead of Hullinger and Gaddis and lunged through the doorway into the hall.

PANIC GRIPPED Dane for a moment, his mind picturing the massacre Blake had planned. Dane knew what Steve Purdy would try. Some of the others, maybe all, would follow his lead. Todd Blake had read Purdy the same way, so this gun trap, baited by Tommy Gaddis who meant nothing at all to Blake, was typical of the schemes spawned in Blake's cunning mind, and it was certain to work if Dane stayed out of it. It had been Cherry's job to hold Dane inside the courtroom until it was too late to stop the fight, and she would have succeeded if it hadn't been for Sue.

Dane raced down the hall, hearing Hullinger's and Gaddis' steps behind him; he saw some of his neighbors lined across the yard in front of the locusts, others in the street holding the horses. It was worse than Dane had guessed. They were all backing Purdy's crazy play.

"Take it easy," Dane yelled as he ran toward them.

"Yeah, we'll take it easy," Purdy bawled. "Go on back to the Blake gals. First it was Sue and now it's Cherry. Hell's bells, old Todd sure knew what kind of honey to use to get your flies. Just a pair of purty fillies."

As Dane reached the locusts, Lorn Freed said earnestly, "We're done taking your orders, Dane. Now stay out of this."

There was no time to look back at Hullinger and young Gaddis. Purdy's hand was already moving toward gun butt as he called, "Hullinger, don't make no trouble and you won't get hurt. We're taking Tommy..."

Dane hit him, a wicked upswinging blow that caught Purdy on the jaw and sent him spinning around and down. Dane shouted, "Don't pull, any of you. Lorn, get your hand away from your iron. Cross 7 is upstairs in the courthouse and they've got their sights notched on us."

Purdy had lifted himself to hands and feet, shook his head, and drawing his gun, tilted his face to look at Dane, fury squeezing his features. "I'll get you, Dane, as sure..."

Dane kicked the gun out of his hand. "I told you to take it easy, Steve."

"You're smart, cowboy."

It was the lanky gunman Dane had seen across the street earlier in the morning. The small smile that lay in the corners of his thin-lipped mouth did not reach to his pale blue eyes.

Dane asked, "Who the devil are you?"

"Jones," the gunman murmured. "Slim Jones, though it strikes me a handle don't make no difference. Smith. Jones. Brown. Same thing." Hullinger and Gaddis had reached the locusts then, and the gunman nodded at Hullinger, a small smile curling the ends of his mouth. "Sheriff I've been around these things most of my life but I never seen it played just like this before. Did it get through your thick skull that you'd been in a hornet's nest?"

Hullinger stopped, color seeping

back into his bruised face. "What are you running off at the mouth about?"

"Murder." The gunman motioned to Purdy who was on his feet, brushing dust off his levis. "This yahoo was bound to kick things loose. I figured there was fifteen men up there, 'bout three to a window. Cutting these boys down would've been easy as knocking pigeons off a barn roof." Contempt wiped the smile from his mouth. "Somebody wants 'em out of the way, and he's sure trying to make it look legal."

Jones wheeled and crossed the street. Purdy, rubbing his jaw, gave Dane a sour look. He said, "Never knew you packed that much wallop, neighbor."

"No hard feelings?" Dane asked.

Without answering, Purdy swung to face Hullinger. "Ain't you playing it kind of risky, Ed?"

"Go to hell," Hullinger muttered, and moved on toward the jail, gun muzzle prodding Tommy Gaddis in the back.

THE COURTROOM was beginning to empty. The townspeople, sensing how closely trouble had been averted, moved timidly along the hall and into the yard. Seeing that there was at least this moment of lull, they hurried past the upper valley men and disappeared along Main Street.

Lorn Freed stood staring up at the row of second story windows. He wiped a hand across his face and brought his eyes to Dane. "What'd the Blake girl want with you?"

"Wanted to tell him she loved him," Purdy jeered. "Nothing like a skirt to get some men's..."

Dane said, "That's all I'm hearing of that, Steve." Turning, he said to Freed, "She was just being friendly, but I've got a hunch that mostly she wanted to keep me inside. Todd knows you boys are on the prod."

The rest had drifted up, puzzled and sour with the uncertainty that faced them. Too, they all sensed how close to death they had been. Lorn Freed's hand trembled as he lifted the sack of Durham from his vest pocket. He said, "Old Todd's purty sharp all right. First he rides up the river to buy you out of the fight.

Then he has Hullinger try to beat hell out of you. Now he puts Cherry on your tail."

"Blake must be scared of you, Dane," a man said.

Purdy snorted. "Just tell me one thing. Why would old Fatty Blake be scared of Dane when all Dane does is to walk around and say, 'Wait, boys. Just keep on waiting and it'll be all right.'"

Dane pinned his eyes on Purdy, suspicion entering his mind for the first time. He had always thought of Purdy as just being brash and perhaps foolhardy. Now he sensed it was more than that. Too much had happened this morning, too much had been said. There could be only two explanations to Purdy's actions. He was so jealous of Dane's leadership that he was risking everything on a wild play to undermine him, or he had taken Blake's pay to push the trouble to the shooting stage. Yet he could not believe either.

"That's right, Steve," Dane said evenly. "Might as well do a little drinking while we're waiting."

CHAPTER

5

The Stranger

LORN FREED caught up with Dane as he strode toward the Starlight, the others stringing along behind. Freed said, "We blamed near went off half-cocked, Dane. We all know it now. Even Steve, I reckon."

"It was close," Dane agreed. He turned his head to look back at Purdy who was pounding a fist into an open palm and talking loudly. The words didn't quite reach Dane, but he knew from the belligerent tone what Purdy was saying. They rounded the corner and turned down Main Street, completely deserted now. Dane glanced at Freed, and the knowledge pressed him that the next few minutes would bring the decision.

Freed must have had the same thought, because he said suddenly, "Any man can wait so long and no longer. We've seen this coming, scared and worried about what Blake would do and when he'd do it. We

figured this trial would bring it to a focus. Don't try to keep it from focusing, Dane."

Lorn Freed had been a somber-faced man and often a little sour. The loss of his family had added to that sourness, but of all the men on the upper river, only Freed had any capacity of leadership and only Freed could balance off Purdy's rashness. Dane said, "Lorn, what's back of Steve's gab?"

"Nothing that's not behind the rest of our gab," Freed said impatiently. "Some of the boys are thinking you sold out to Blake. Or one of the girls maybe. They even...well, they say you got us organized just so you'd have something to sell Blake."

Dane was sick. Looking back over the past year since they had felt Blake's first pressure, he could see nothing in his actions of which he was ashamed. If he hadn't taken the lead, every one of the upper valley men would have been out of the country by now, but he had taken the lead, he had defied Blake, and they had hung on. Yet he saw how they felt. He was in love with Sue and that would look bad to them. Then Cherry sending for him this morning hadn't helped.

THEY SHOULDERED through the batwings and moved to the bar, the rest stringing along behind Dane and Freed. They had their drinks, a sudden silence falling upon them. Dane stared down at the polished mahogany, turning his empty glass with the tips of his fingers. Freed, he knew, was right about these men reaching the end of their capacity for waiting. None of them wanted this to come to a showdown any more than Dane Ross, but the thing he could not make them see was that breaking Tommy Gaddis out of jail was not the way to force the showdown.

Dane stepped back from the bar, gaze running down the line of men. Some of them were trembling, still thinking, Dane knew, of the narrow margin by which death had missed them. Others were close to the breaking point, so close that it would take little to make them jump into any

kind of a fight that came along. But it was Purdy who was the most affected. He stood rubbing his jaw, eagerness gone from his boyish face. In its place was a brooding bitterness. Once Dane had thought of him as his best friend. It would never, no matter what happened now, be the same between them again.

The gunman Jones had come in behind the upper valley men and taking a bottle, had gone to a back table, but he wasn't drinking. He was watching the men at the bar with sharp intentness. Outside Blake and Yord and the Cross 7 hands moved along the street, Blake's riders staring at the Starlight with wary suspicion. Then they were out of sight.

One of the men at the bar said, "There was just one thing I enjoyed this morning. That was looking at Ed Hullinger's face."

No one said anything for a moment. Then Freed broke the tension by asking, "What's in your mind, Dane?"

"I don't aim to let Tommy hang any more than the rest of you boys," Dane said sharply. "Likewise I don't aim to let this gab go on about me selling out to Blake or his girls. I love Sue. You know that, but loving her won't keep me from fighting Blake, and if you had any sense, you'd know that."

"Keep talking," Purdy breathed. "We sure like to hear it."

"I'm right happy about that," Dane said. "If you want to make your talk stick about me selling out to Blake, you can make your try."

Purdy stiffened, and for a moment Dane thought the man was going for his gun. Then he relaxed, breathing hard. "No use of us swapping smoke, Dane, but I'm the gent that says you've sold out." He jabbed a finger at old man Breen. "Howdy here says Sue was up to see you early this morning."

Howdy Breen would know because Sue had stopped at the Breen place on her way back to town. There was no use denying it, but he couldn't tell them why Sue had come or what she had said about owning half of Cross 7. Dane did not know what the relationship was between Sue and

Todd Blake, but he wouldn't put it beyond Blake to murder her if such a thing would further his ambitions, and it was possible Cherry had guessed that Sue had warned him about the Cross 7 being upstairs.

"I reckon it's a man's own business when his girl comes to see him," Dane said finally. "What you chuckle-headed hairpins don't see is that Blake wants you to go after Tommy. If anybody here is selling out to Blake, it's the hombre who keeps yapping about saving Tommy's neck."

Purdy's face was red. He took a step forward, hands clenched, but even under this kind of pressure, he didn't have what it took to pull on Dane Ross. It was Lorn Freed who stopped it with, "Throwing that back at Steve don't help any. You say going after Tommy would outlaw us. I'm thinking that it'd be better to be outlaws than to let Tommy die."

"You're damned right," Purdy choked. "Let's go, unless the rest of you have gone as yellow as Ross."

Dane expected something like that, but when he heard it, he lost his temper. No man had ever called him yellow before. He started toward Purdy, but Freed caught him by the arm. "That's no good, Dane. Which side are you on?"

Again temper, honed to a razor edge by all that had happened these last three hours, sent a red haze rushing across Dane's vision. He jerked free, slamming Freed against the bar. He said thickly, "I ought to walk out on the bunch of you. Most memories are pretty damned short, but I guess you boys have got the shortest there is."

"No," Freed said, "but we're going to do something. Today."

THE GUNMAN got up and moved toward Dane. "Mebbe you won't cotton to me horning in right here, but it won't hurt to listen to somebody who don't give a damn about what happens to you. This hombre," he jerked a hand at Dane, "does. What he's saying is straight goods. The minute you get outside the law, Blake has got the excuse he wants. If you'd pulled this Gaddis kid away

from the sheriff, it would've happened then."

Freed nodded somberly. "I reckon. Still, we ain't getting anywhere."

"There's one thing you can do," Dane said. "Get out of town. All but Lorn. We'll stay here, and when it breaks open, Lorn can go fetch you in."

"The hell we will..." Howdy Breen began.

Purdy silenced him with a backhanded cuff. He asked, "Why?"

"It'll worry Blake because he won't know why you're sloping out. That's one thing. Second thing is that with just me and Lorn in town, he'll know we ain't figuring on breaking the jail open and maybe start something. Then the shoe's on the other foot."

Surprisingly, Purdy said, "Let's ride, boys." Wheeling away from the bar, he strode out, and presently the hoof beats of their horses came to Dane and died.

Freed rolled a smoke, studying Dane. "You're plumb surprising, boy. Just what have you got in your noggin?"

"I may be as crazy as a coot," Dane answered, "but I figured that if our bunch was out of town, Blake might send his outfit home."

"Then what?"

Dane gave the gunman an uneasy glance. "Jones, you sure tail us, don't you? Must like us."

"Yeah," the gunman said. "You're damned interesting hombres. You see, I figured I'd play this little game with you."

"Go ahead, Dane," Freed urged. "This long drink of water ain't hurting anything but the scenery."

"I figured we'd kidnap Blake," Dane said. "Then we'll bargain for Tommy."

Freed let a slow smile break across his taciturn face. "So that's it. You and me don't have no family. We'll make outlaws out of ourselves, but nobody gets hurt but us."

"That's it. I'd have asked Purdy, but I don't trust him no more than he trusts me."

Freed nodded. "All right, Dane. We'll play it that way."

"I've got a bad fault of sticking my

nose into things," Jones murmured. "Like now. I'll give you a hand on that business of grabbing Blake."

Dane didn't like the man. He had never trusted professional gunmen, and this Jones had the brand. Dane would have told him to go to hell if Freed hadn't said, "I don't know why you're interested, friend, but we could use your gun."

"I reckon you can," Jones agreed, "and as to why I'm interested, let's say I'm curious." He turned from Freed to Dane. "This Blake's got two girls, ain't he?"

When Dane didn't answer, Freed said, "That's right. Cherry and Sue. I don't know the whole yarn, but seems like Sue's an orphan Blake adopted."

Jones built a smoke, slim fingers quick-moving and supple. He asked, "When she was a kid?"

"Don't know as to that."

"How long ago?"

"Don't know that, either."

"Blake been here a long time?"

"Got here ahead of the rest of us, so he took what he wanted. The hell of it is he aims to keep on taking more all the time."

Shrugging, Jones said, "Every range has some devil like that," and returned to his table.

Dane watched the gunman, suspicion growing in him. Freed smiled as he rolled a smoke, apparently sensing what was in Dane's mind. He said, "Quit worrying. That hombre aims to be in this ruckus afore it's done, so we might as well have him on our side."

"If he ain't already on Blake's side," Dane said, and turned into the street.

CHAPTER

6

Top Dog On Buck River

WESTON was behind the counter rearranging some bolts of cloth that had come in the day before. Hearing Dane's steps, he whirled and froze when he saw who it was, fear squeezing his features. He whispered, "So help me, Dane, I couldn't do no different."

Dane came to the counter. He had always liked Weston, and had trusted him until circumstances had made

him the deciding witness in Tommy Gaddis' trial, but he had learned long ago that men who are honest through ordinary times may not be honest when the chips were down. He asked, his voice lashing Weston with his scorn, "Curt, did you ever see a man hung?"

Weston shook his head and edged away from Dane. "Stand still," Dane said angrily. "It's a devil of a thing, Curt. They put a rope around his neck and drop him." He put his hands palm down on the counter and leaned toward the storekeeper. "You won't forget that if you see them hang Tommy. The memory of it's bad enough, but the part you'll remember is what you done. If you live to be a million years old, Curt, you'll never forget that you're the two-legged weasel who put the loop around Tommy's neck."

Weston began to tremble. "Get out."

"You don't like the sound of it, do you?" Dane asked contemptuously. "There's a lot of things you'll be hearing from now on you ain't gonna like. Preachers do a pile of talking about going to hades when we die. Curt, you won't have to die. When you told that lie in court this morning, you built a fire inside you. You'll never put it out. You'll kill yourself before you're done, Curt."

"Get out," Weston breathed again.

"Not yet. You're the only man who saw the fight and was close enough to hear what was said. You told me it was a fair fight and Mayer had an even draw. You didn't tell it that way in court. Why?"

Fear deepened in Weston's eyes, naked and terrible. He tried to jerk free, and then strength and drained out of him and he went slack. He whispered, "All right, Dane."

Dane released his grip. "Let's have it."

"I've worked hard all my life Dane," Weston swallowed and licked dry lips. "I never had any luck. Todd threatened to kill me when I sold you boys grub on tick. He said the easiest way to get you off the river was to starve you and I didn't do it. I trusted you and fed you. Did you forget that, Dane?"

"Go on."

"Then Todd wanted to buy your outfits. You wouldn't go. He offered a fair enough price. More'n you could expect to get under the circumstances. You should have taken his offer."

"Why did you lie this morning?"

"I'm telling you." Weston wiped a hand across his face. "Cherry came in last night. I ain't young no more, and I never figured I was handsome enough to make a woman look at me twice. I've always worshipped Cherry, but I never had the courage to tell her. Then last night she told me she loved me. She said she always has, and hell, I... well, here I was, feeling that way and not knowing what she thought of me. Funny, ain't it, Dane?"

"She stayed all night with you?"

"What if she did?" Weston cried. He fought his fear for a moment, shrinking away from Dane. "You don't understand, boy. We didn't do anything wrong. We're getting married right away. Todd's got heart trouble. Cross 7 goes to Cherry. Then it'll be mine and Cherry'll be my wife. It's all I ever dreamed of. I figured your bunch would bust Tommy out of jail. That's what Todd said you'd do. I didn't aim to make the boy hang. Can't you see how it is, Dane?"

"I see all right," Dane said hoarsely. "I see you're a rabbit-headed fool. She'll never marry you. Todd may get heart trouble, but if he does, it'll come from lead poisoning. The Judge should have asked the Lord to have mercy on your soul instead of Tommy's."

IT WAS NOT until Dane swung to the door that he saw the lanky gunman Jones standing in front of the store, thumbs hooked into gun-belts, an enigmatic smile curling the corners of his mouth. He said, "You've sure got a way with folks, cowboy."

"Why'n hell are you following me?" Dane demanded.

"I wasn't exactly following you," Jones said. "I just discovered I was plumb out of tobacco." He nodded at Weston. "Sack of Bull Durham, fellow, soon as you get done with the shakes."

Dane pushed past the gunman and turned along the boardwalk to the Casino. The Cross 7 hands were still in town. This was the best chance he'd have to get them out, and he'd have to get them out if he and Lorn Freed had a chance at Todd Blake.

For a moment doubts pushed at Dane. Except for Freed, he was alone, and that wasn't the way he wanted it. That was what had been wrong with most of his life. He had been alone too much. His father had died when he was fifteen. He'd hung on, supporting his mother until she died. He was nineteen then. Still he'd hung on, through the hard years when beef wasn't worth the hide that covered it, hung on and hoped. Now the hopes were dead. He was not a man who could marry a woman who owned half of Cross 7. Or even if he was that sort of man, he would be an outlaw when he kidnapped Todd Blake, and that was enough to cut him away from Sue.

He moved down the boardwalk to the Casino, knowing exactly where his course of action was taking him. With grim relish, he thought of how Steve Purdy and the rest who had condemned him so heartily less than an hour ago would feel when they learned what he and Freed had done. He shoved the batwings apart and went in. Cool air heavy with sweat and horse smell and liquor rushed at him. He blinked a moment until his eyes became accustomed to the gloom. The gabble of talk stopped; he felt their stares fasten on him, felt the pressure of their hostility. Then he made out Hullinger standing with Judge Yord and Todd Blake at the bar. As he started toward them, the Cross 7 riders began edging away.

"Ross."

It was a hard voice, heavy with unsaid menace. Dane made a half turn toward the poker table on the other side of the room. Then he saw who it was, Stony Drew, the Cross 7 ramrod, who had been hired by Blake the year before because he was a wizard with a gun and had a killer's heart.

"What's biting you, Stony?" Dane asked.

"Git out. I didn't think you had the

sand it took to come in here. Now git before I drill you."

Drew was small and beady-eyed with sharp features and a constant malice mirrored in his face that seemed to pull his eyes into narrow slits and turn the corners of his mouth down. He worshipped Todd Blake because he worshipped power and money, and Blake had both. Too, Drew enjoyed the prestige that his job gave him.

Dane understood this about the man, and he knew he wasn't fast enough to match the gunman's speed, so he dealt with him the only way he could. He let his eyes touch Drew's face briefly as he might glance at a strange ugly insect. Then he went on to the bar and faced Hullinger.

"You still sheriff, Ed?" Dane asked.

Hullinger swelled like a proddy rooster. "You're damned right I'm sheriff."

DANE SWUNG a hand toward the Cross 7 hands. "Then why ain't you doing your job?"

"Now look here, Ross. If you're asking for the rest of that licking..."

"Shut up and listen. You said Todd wanted my bunch out of town. All right. They're out. Now move Cross 7."

"That wasn't in the deal. Why should I move Cross 7?"

"If it's fitting for one outfit to get out of town to prevent trouble it's fitting for the other side to get out."

"And let your bunch come in and bust Gaddis out?"

"It's what you want, ain't it?"

"I'm wondering," Todd Blake broke in, "why you said I wanted them out, Ed?"

Only Blake's black eyes, almost buried behind rolls of fat, hinted at the shrewd cunning that governed him. As was his habit, he was taking the round-about way of reaching his goal. For the moment while Judge Yord was there, he was forgetting his threats of the morning.

Hullinger shifted uneasily, not sure what line Blake was playing. He said, "Well, I thought it was what you said."

"You hear damned bad," Blake

breathed. "Your job was taking care of the prisoner."

"Sure." Hullinger bobbed his head, plainly puzzled. "Sure."

"Now, friend Ross." Blake oozed around to face Dane. "So you think it would be fair if my boys was out of town. I respect your courage, but not your judgment in coming here. If Stony decided to smoke you down, you'd be a dead pigeon."

"So would you," Dane said bluntly. "I ain't forgetting you tried to drill me this morning. I've been thinking I'd fix everything if I put a window in your fat skull."

"Now that might be." Blake nodded at Yord. "Judge, I was thinking that maybe you and Ed ought to drop over to the jail. Just to see if Gaddis wants anything. Since these are his last hours on earth, we should look after him."

Yord hesitated, frowning. He had a pride that was entirely lacking in Hullinger, and Dane had wondered if his association with Blake was growing irksome. But if he felt rebellious, he did not voice it at this time. Without a word, he nodded and swung toward the door. He went out, Hullinger following, and Blake said, "There went the law, Ross. It's you and Cross 7 now. This morning you were not open to reason. You saw how the trial went. I get what I want in the long run and usually without this much fuss. It ain't no secret that I want your range and I'll buy it fair and square, or I'll get it some other way."

This was covering old ground that had been covered many times, and Dane was sure that Blake was using it to work around to something. "You won't buy it," Dane said. "What about these..."

"They'll go," Blake cut in, "but not just yet. You were loco enough to come in here and push us a little, so it's a good time to push back, but I won't because I want you to go over to the hotel and see Cherry. She's got something to say that'll interest you."

"You can go to the devil," Dane said. "I know how you worked Weston. It don't go with me."

Blake's eyes seemed to sink farther into the fat blob of his head. His

pendulous lower lip stiffened against his teeth. "So you tell me to go to..."

"Better not, Fatty." It was the gunman, Jones, standing inside the batwings. "Tell your barman to move away from that scattergun. Ross, back up."

IN ANOTHER moment Dane Ross would have died before a shotgun blast. He had forgotten the barkeep, a mistake that had come close to being fatal. This was the reason Blake had sent Yord out of the saloon. Dane backed toward the door, temper a wildness in him. "Todd, you're even lower than I figured. I should have plugged you this morning."

Blake was a motionless ball of fat, back to the bar, hands at his sides. Only his eyes seemed alive, and they did not show the disappointment that must have been in him.

"You're hell on the talk, Ross," Stony Drew said.

"Shut up, Stony." Blake took a long breath, his belly rising with it and dropping as air went out of him. "Dane, my boys'll be out of town inside of five minutes."

Dane was beside Jones then. He asked, "Still following me?"

"Outside," Jones said.

"After you."

Jones grinned. "Proud, ain't you?"

Jones backed through the door and away from it, Dane a pace behind. He said, "Thanks, but I don't savvy."

They turned toward the Starlight, Jones twisting a smoke as he walked. He said, "Well, I guess it's just the way I'm built. Curious as all get-out about things like this."

It wasn't good enough, but the man's face was an unreadable mask. Jones had saved his life, and for this moment at least his motives were being held secret behind his inscrutable eyes. They reached the Starlight and waited until the Cross 7 hands, bow-legged Stony Drew in front, left the Casino, mounted, and quit town in a wild run, their yells curling back behind them to linger a moment as echoes, and then die.

"A salty bunch," Jones murmured. "Wonder why they moved out?"

"To invite us to move in on the

jail," Dane said, and turned into the saloon.

Lorn Freed was playing solitaire at a back table. He said, "Come here, Dane," and held up an envelope. "That towheaded kid who works around the hotel brought this in a while ago. I said I'd give it to you."

Dane took it, aware of Jones' steady scrutiny. He tore the envelope open, pulled the single sheet of paper from it, and read, "I need help, Dane, I've got to leave town right after dark. Have two horses in the alley back of the hotel before the moon comes up. I wouldn't ask you if I wasn't desperate, but I have no one else. Sue."

For a long moment Dane stood staring at the note. He couldn't be sure because he hadn't seen much of Sue's handwriting, but he thought she had written this. It might be on the level. Maybe Blake had found out what she had told him that morning. Or Cherry had got it out of Sue that she had warned him about the Cross 7 hands being upstairs in the courthouse.

On the other hand, it might be a trick, for it was the sort of thing Todd Blake would think of. Still, trick or not, Dane knew he would go. If Sue had written the note, she was in trouble, for Dane was sure of one thing. Nothing that Blake or Cherry would have done would have forced her to write it to lure him into a trap.

CHAPTER

7

New Enemies

LORN FREED laid down his cards. "Come to think of it, my tapeworm ain't been fed for a devil of a long time. Let's put the feed bag on, Dane."

"It's time, I reckon. You eating, Jones?"

"Might as well. Say, how much is that fat hombre worth?"

Freed shot a quick glance at Dane and brought his eyes back to Jones. "Dunno. Why?"

"Curious," the gunman murmured. "Just curious."

They ate in the hotel dining room, Dane pondering Jones' interest in Todd Blake's wealth and finding no

explanation. It was late for dinner, and none of Blake's adherents was in evidence, but when they went back through the lobby, Cherry was sitting in a corner behind a scraggly-leaved geranium. She rose when she saw Dane, and putting down her book, called to him.

"Mighty popular with the women," Jones said sardonically.

Dane walked past the desk toward Cherry, reining down his temper. Freed was right on one thing. If Jones did get into the fight, and he couldn't miss the way he was moving, Dane wanted him on his side.

"You shouldn't have left me in the courthouse this morning," Cherry pouted, "I'm not used to being treated that way."

"The Blakes are gonna be treated a lot different than they have been in the past," Dane said. "Maybe you'd better start getting used to it."

Surprise shocked her. "What do you mean?"

"You railroaded Tommy, you and Todd, but I'll see it don't work. That's a promise."

"Why, Dane, I didn't have anything to do with it."

There was no use in telling her he had talked to Curt Weston. She would only look him in the eyes and lie, so he shrugged carelessly and turned away with, "You ain't fooling nobody, Cherry."

She caught his arm. "Dane, don't go like this. Come back to my room." He jerked free. "Sue there?"

She bit her lip, her pride stung. "No. Sue isn't well today. Too much excitement at the trial, I guess." She moved toward him again, hesitantly as if not understanding him. "Most men don't treat me like this, Dane. Do I have to throw myself at you?"

"Don't throw yourself very far," Dane said dryly, "or you'll break your neck. I don't aim to catch you."

Jones had come up behind Dane. He said, "You sure puzzle me, Ross. What kind of a man are you to turn down a purty gal like this? You ought to have your eyes examined."

Dane whirled on him, hands fisted. "Hang you, Jones, if you don't quit sticking that big nose of yours into my business..."

"Well now, it's just a case of your business needing some getting into. You need advice. That's all. Any man needs advice when he says no to a purty gal like Miss Blake here. If it was me..." He threw out his big hands in a gesture of hopelessness, "Hell, I never could get a woman to look at me twice. I guess I'm just so ugly I scare 'em with that first look."

"You aren't pretty for a fact," Cherry said. "What business did you have butting in?"

"None," Jones said blandly. "I'm just curious. Seems like it's an awful bad fault I've got. Born that way, I reckon." He turned his back to the girl and brushed Dane as he walked away, his soft, "Make a date with her after sundown," barely reaching Dane.

"Who is he?" Cherry asked when Jones was out of earshot.

"Calls himself Jones. Never saw him till this morning." Dane watched the gunman rejoin Freed and say something to him. Then they left the hotel and turned toward the Starlight. Dane swung back to face Cherry. "I reckon Jones was right about me needing advice. I've got some things to do this afternoon, but tonight after dark... I mean, if you're going to be in your room..."

"Why, Dane, you don't mean you like me that well?"

"You are all-fired purty," he said lamely.

"I'll be in my room. Come in through the back door. Dad's kind of funny that way."

JONES AND Freed were playing J poker when Dane reached the Starlight. Freed pulled back a chair. "Sit down, boy. This is a poor man's game, so you'll fit."

Jones reached for the deck and shuffled. "Make your date?"

Dane nodded. "You'd better know what you're doing. That woman's just plain poison."

"Mighty purty poison," Jones said.

Dane sat down. "Where do you get into this thing? And don't give me none of that being curious hogwash."

Jones started to deal and then stopped, his pale blue eyes probing Dane's. For the first time his mask

of casual indifference was dropped from his thin face and Dane saw worry and concern and an intensity of purpose that shocked him.

"I aim to bust Blake," Jones said at last. "I figger I'm a pretty good man, but I know I ain't big enough to do the job alone." He spread his hands. "Soooo, I've got to get help where I can."

"I say we can use some help ourselves," Freed said.

"Yeah," Dane agreed, "only it looks kind o' queer, this hombre turning up the morning of the last day of Tommy's trial."

"I knew about it," Jones said. "I heard how Blake had the whole county under his thumb and was pushing you boys, so I just stayed out of town till the windup. I figgered it would blow up today. It would have if you hadn't handled it smart. But I've got a better idea than taking Blake. We'll take Cherry. Freed says he's loco about her."

Dane drummed his fingers on the green-topped table, thinking about it. He said, "We'd get every Cross 7 man in the valley on our tail."

"I reckon we would," Jones dealt the cards. "But we'll sure as hell have an ace in our hands that Blake can't overlook. You can keep the gal busy, Ross, and I'll take care of the horses. Her room's on the west side of the hotel, ain't it?"

Dane nodded. "Right back of the lobby. Blake keeps three rooms rented all the time. Cherry had the big front one and Sue uses the little one next to it. The back one's Blake's. There's an alley door that opens into the hall."

"There's a vacant lot on that side of the hotel, ain't there?"

"That's right."

Jones' grin was quick and wicked. "We'll give that Cherry gal a ride tonight she'll remember."

They were slow hours for Dane. He quit the poker game after a time and paced restlessly around the room. Later he sat down at another table and played some solitaire, practiced pool, and then idled at the bar, turning his drink in his fingers, a long time before he downed it. He wasn't sure he was smart in agreeing to

Jones' plan. He'd get Sue out if he had to tear the hotel down, and it would probably be easy enough to get Cherry, but that was the part he didn't like. He'd rather have stayed with his original idea of taking Todd Blake.

THEN THE sun had dropped behind the rimrock that frowned at the town from the other side of the river, and dusk began trickling across the valley. Freed and Jones rose and moved to the bar. Jones said, "I'll get the horses."

"I'll go along," Dane said.

"Where do I come in?" Freed demanded.

"We may bump into one of Blake's men," Dane paid for his drink. "Take care of him, Lorn, so when we get there with the horses, there won't be nobody around to kick up a fuss."

They went out through the back and paced along the rubbish-littered alley to the livery stable. Dane saddled his horse and asked for Sue's. The hostler gave him a sour look. "No siree Bob," he growled. "Old Todd would bust me if I let you have that animal."

"Put the saddle on him," Dane dropped his hand to gun butt. "If you tell Todd I took him, you'll wake up with a window in your skull."

Cursing, the hostler threw gear on Sue's bay. Jones was saddling a livery animal when Dane said he'd take Sue's horse. He drifted up now, asking, "What's that for?"

"Sue's going along."

"You're loco," Jones said angrily. "One female's enough to handle at a time. No sense making trouble for the other girl."

"I didn't tell you," Dane said slowly, "but Sue's in a jam. She's helped me out, and I'm guessing Blake's aiming to stop her meddling. We can't leave her." He motioned to the scowling hostler. "Jones, I'm thinking this hombre is aiming to light out for Blake as soon as we're gone."

"We'll knock him in the head," Jones said.

"No. He can hold the horses. Keep your eyes on him."

A moment later they led their horses down the alley, Dane in front, eyes

stabbing the darkness. They stopped at the edge of the pool of light washing out from the hotel's back windows. Dane pointed. "That's Cherry's room. The one on this side is Sue's."

There was a light in Cherry's window, but Sue's was dark. Jones said, "Hurry it up."

Dane went in through the back door, tried Sue's, and found that it was locked. It was what he expected, but still it added to his worries. He paused, listening, wondering whether he should smash Sue's door open. There was no unusual sound, just the regular kitchen racket and the clatter of dishes from the dining room. The front end of the hall was dark. Dane went back and blew out the bracket lamp near the alley entrance. He returned, moving slowly in the darkness, and tapped on Cherry's door.

"Come in," Cherry called.

Dane turned the knob and went in, closing the door behind him. It was a double room with an archway between the parlor and the bedroom. Dane was in the parlor, and in the thin light washing out from the bedroom, he could see the thick red carpet, the mahogany furniture, the velvet-covered love seat set against the far wall. He took off his hat and stood with his back to the door, not liking the feel of things, but knowing it was too late to back out.

"That you, Dane?" Cherry asked.

"Yeah, it's me."

SHE CAME out of the bedroom, a lamp in her hand. She paused just inside the room to look at him, and the light, falling across her face and hair, brought out her stirring beauty. She was wearing a blue silk robe that was loosely tied by a cord. Dane's breath came out of him in a heavy sigh. He had made a mistake. If Todd Blake found him here, there would be only one explanation as far as the Cross 7 owner was concerned. What was worse, he'd never get Cherry on a horse in a getup like this.

"Well?" Cherry asked. "Like me?"

"Sure," Dane blurted, "but where's Sue?"

Cherry carefully set the lamp on the table. He saw only the profile of

her face for a moment, but it was enough. She was wildly angry, so angry that he thought she would have shot him if she'd had a gun in her hand. Slowly she turned, and by the time she faced him, she had gained control of herself.

"Sue's in her room. I told you she wasn't well." She crossed the room to him in a lazy graceful walk, and the room was filled with her presence. "Why ask for Sue when I'm here?"

He pressed back against the door, uneasiness deepening in him. "I wanted to see her. That's all. I just wanted to see her." Her perfume rushed at him, stirring his senses, and he felt the pound of his pulse. "I guess I'd better mosey."

"Now I like that. You act as if you expected to find Sue in here." She took his hand. "Come over here and sit down. I'll go find Sue for you. I don't think she feels like talking to anyone, but I'll see."

He went, not believing her because he knew that no man could believe her, but still he hoped she would keep her word. They were close to the love seat when she stopped and taking his other hand, turned him to face her.

"Every woman has her pride; Dane," she whispered. "I'm hurt that you want to see Sue when I'm right here with you."

Without warning, she threw her arms around his neck and kissed him. He tried to push her away; he heard steps in the hall and clawed for his gun, expecting to see Todd Blake charge through the door. Cherry clung to him and shoved him against the love seat, somehow keeping his hand from reaching gun butt.

The door was shoved open. Dane, backing up, tripped and fell against the love seat. He went down, Cherry on top. They rolled off to the floor in a tangle of bare shapely legs and arms and flapping robe. He grunted, the woman's weight driving wind out of his lungs. He squirmed free, and pushing Cherry off, got to his feet. There, faces mirroring their contempt, stood Steve Purdy and the rest of Dane's neighbors who had left town that morning.

Cherry screamed, "Get out! Can't you see we're busy?" She scrambled to her feet, pulling her robe together, making a show of being furiously angry.

"So we were to go home and stay there while you messed around with Todd Blake's purty gal." Steve Purdy's eyes were bright with malicious triumph. "I reckon I had it figured just the size game you were playing, but it sure riles me the way I let you fool me."

"I haven't been messing around with her," Dane said angrily. "I came in here..."

"What do you mean, you haven't been messing around with me, you two-bit lying cow nurse?" Cherry raged. "Don't believe him, Purdy. I made that mistake. He said he loved me. He promised to get you boys out of town. He said nobody would know we were together. What are you doing here, anyhow?"

IT WAS crazy and wild and utterly senseless, but Steve Purdy and the others were not of a mind to think straight. Purdy said in biting fury, "You won't doublecross us no more, Ross. Pull your iron."

"Who sent you word to come to town?" Dane demanded. "Who told you I was here?"

For a moment Purdy hesitated. Howdy Breen yelled, "Don't make no difference. You're here. We're seeing you with our own eyes, and all the time you've been pretending you was in love with Sue."

Steve Purdy drew his gun. He said, "You had your chance. Now we're taking you outside."

Purdy would kill him if he didn't obey. Dane saw that in the man's flushed face. He had no chance for his own gun, for Cherry was hanging to his right arm. He jerked free, throwing Cherry against the wall, and lunged toward Purdy, wanting to laugh in the other's face. Sue had shoved through the crowd and was holding a small gun on Purdy.

"I'm sure glad to see you," Dane said. "How'd you get out of your room?"

"Somebody smashed the door in

and shoved a gun in my hand," Sue answered. "Purdy, I always thought you were a fool, but you're a bigger one than I took you for. Are you taking Todd Blake's money, or just playing his game?"

"Neither one," Purdy choked. "Get that gun out of my back."

"Maybe you aren't taking his pay, but you're playing his game whether you know it or not. Dane's the only man in your bunch who's smart and tough enough for Dad to be afraid of. This morning Dane kept you from getting killed, and Dad never forgets or forgives a man who breaks up one of his schemes. He'd have had Dane murdered before now, but it's safer to get fools like you to do his killing. Drop your gun, Purdy."

He let his gun go, his face thunder dark. Sue backed toward Dane, her gun rock steady in her hand. Cherry, cursing wildly, lunged at her. Dane grabbed a silk-covered shoulder and shoved her into the love seat.

"Got the horses?" Sue asked.

"All set," Dane answered. "We'll go out through the window."

"I'll get you," Purdy bawled. "I'll hunt you till I get you, you damned double-crosser, and we'll bust that jail down and get Tommy."

Dane didn't wait to listen. He kicked the glass from the window and turned back to face his one-time friends. "Stay put. Go ahead, Sue. The horses are in the alley."

Sue slid out through the window. Dane waited until he heard her steps fade down the alley. He backed out after her and raced along the side of the building. A gun opened up in front of him, the slugs screaming past him, ribbons of flame leaping into the darkness.

"That'll dust 'em off," Jones shouted. "Here's your horse, Ross. Where's the other girl?"

"She didn't have riding duds on."

Dane swung into the saddle. "Where's Sue?"

"She headed up the river," Jones answered, "and didn't waste no time getting started."

They left town on the run, the darkness swallowing them, and presently caught Sue. They pulled their

horses down, Dane swinging in beside Sue. He asked, "You all right?"

"Of course. Anyone coming?"

"No," Jones answered.

She leaned forward in the saddle, staring at the narrow wedge of Jones' face. "I thought you were Lorn Freed. Who are you?"

The gunman struck a match and held the flame close to her face. It was then that Dane, for the first time, saw that she was far prettier than Cherry. Her lips were full and warm, and her eyes, trying to pierce the darkness to see Jones's face, reflected her inherent honesty. It was the kind of beauty that good character gives to a woman's face, the kind of beauty Cherry would never know.

"You're Sue," Jones said softly. "I didn't get a good look at you this morning. You look a lot like our mother."

"No," Sue cried. "Who are you?"

"Your brother."

CHAPTER

8

Dead Man Alive

THERE WAS a moment of pregnant silence. Then Dane heard Sue's long breath, heard her whisper, "George! Dad, I mean Todd, said you were dead."

"He wanted you to believe that, I reckon," Jones said, "and I damned near was. A drygulcher knocked me out of my saddle south of Tucson a piece. Just after Dad cashed in and Blake fetched your herd across the mountains. One of his men maybe. Maybe he thought he got me."

Sue was crying then. She was out of her saddle, saying over and over, "George, George, I thought you were dead." Jones stepped down and held her in his arms, and Dane, watching, felt his throat tighten.

"It's been so long, George," Sue said. "I was just a little girl the last time you were home."

"Six, the way I figger. It was five years after than when Dad died. Old Benny Bemis had a picture of you. You looked a lot like Ma then."

"What was that you said about Blake bringing your herd across the mountains?" Dan asked.

"Dad, I mean Todd, was supposed

to be our best friend," Sue said bitterly. "My father believed him. There was a doctor in the deal, too. He said Father had heart trouble and wouldn't live long, so Father made out his will, leaving everything to me and appointing Todd my guardian."

"I'd pulled out," Jones cut in. "Had to see the world. I didn't want no part of the outfit, and I don't now."

"As soon as Father died," Sue went on, "Todd sold our place, brought more cattle, and drove out here. He wanted me to call him Dad and said he'd treat me like Cherry."

"Has he?" Jones demanded.

"Yes, except where Cherry is concerned," Sue said. "No one except somebody who's lived with her could know how mean she is, and I guess it was natural for Todd to favor her over me. Like a fool, I told Cherry I'd been out to see Dane this morning and that when I go my half of Cross 7, I wasn't going to stand for any more of Todd's dirty work. That was when they locked me up. I bribed the hotel kid to take my note when he brought my dinner. I think Todd would have killed me tonight if I hadn't got out."

"Who got you out?" Dane asked.

"Me," Jones answered. "I saw you'd got into a jam and as long as Sue knew the lay of the land, I figgered she could do more than I could."

"It was so dark, I thought you were Lorn Freed," Sue said. "Why have you waited so long, George?"

"IT TOOK me a devil of a long time to get on my feet after I'd been shot," Jones answered. "Then it was several years before I heard Dad was dead. When I got home, nobody knew anything about you or the cattle. Benny Bemis figgered the medico poisoned Dad and Blake paid him for it. Anyhow, the doctor had sloped out of the country and none of the neighbors knew anything about it except that Blake had taken you and the cattle and moved across the mountains."

"It would be like looking for a needle in a haystack," Sue said.

"Worse. Some of the neighbors thought Blake had gone on to Harney County. Some said he'd driven

plumb through to Wyoming. Others had heard of him on the Malheur. He'd changed his name, so I was going blind. I was over on the John Day when I heard about this Todd Blake who was so fat he couldn't pull his boots on. I came over to see if he was my man. It had been a long time since I'd seen him, but I knew him all right."

"Why didn't you let me know who you were?" Sue asked.

"I got a look at him and then I cleared out of town and stayed out till this morning." Jones took a breath. "I wanted to nose around on account of I'd heard about this scrap between the up-river boys and Blake, and I aimed to throw in with the little fellows when the showdown came. The hell of it is I don't have no proof that the herd Blake first brought over the mountains was yours. Have you?"

"No. He kept all the papers and I suppose he destroyed them a long time ago."

"We might get somewhere if we had any dinero to hire a lawyer, but I don't have nothing. Besides, with Judge Yord tied up with Blake like he is, I'm afraid we're between a rock and the hard place."

"Blake didn't recognize you?" Dane asked.

"No, I'm sure he didn't. I was purty young when I left home and it's been a long time like I said. Anyhow, he wouldn't think of it if he figgered I was dead."

Gunfire racketed into the night, muted by distance. Dane swore bitterly. "Sounds like that fool Purdy finally set it off. I reckon Cross 7 hands are back in town."

"Purdy was the one Todd counted on," Sue said. "That was why Cherry got you away from them this morning. Todd's idea was that if the upper river men were dead, it'd be easy to deal with their widows. They could handle you any time."

"Cherry about fixed it so I'd be handled," Dane said sourly.

"She sent Purdy the note," Sue told him. "It said you two were getting married and you were throwing in with Cross 7, so Purdy and the rest had better get out of the country."

"Seemed mighty queer the way they came in on us."

"I know the way Todd planned it. He was going to wait in the lobby with Yord. When they came in, Todd aimed to offer them a better deal than he had before. Yord was supposed to watch, and when you got into Cherry's room, he was to give Todd a sign. Then Todd was going to say that you were with Cherry now in her bedroom, and they'd better take the deal because you'd quit them. Of course they'd have to see, so I suppose they jammed into Cherry's room."

"Sue knows where my place is," Dane said. "You go with her, Jones. I'll be there by sunup if I'm still alive."

"What are you going to do?"

"I'm going back."

"You'll just get yourself killed." She came to him, her face upturned.

He looked down at the pale oval of her face, and he thought again that every hope he had in this world was bound up in this slim-bodied girl. He said, "I love you. I guess I'd better prove it by doing a job."

"No, Dane. It's our job, mine and George's."

"Take care of her, Jones," Dane said hoarsely, and reining his animal around, rode back to Piute.

He had been afraid she would argue with him or try to stop him, but she had done neither. The last he saw of her she was standing beside her brother in the darkness.

CHAPTER

9

The Answers

DANE RODE into Piute cautiously, Main Street a wide patch of dust between two irregular rows of lights. The upper valley men's horses were racked in front of the hotel. There was another string before the Casino, and Dane felt a premonition of failure touch him. Stony Drew and the Cross 7 men were back in town.

Tying his mount at the dark end of the street, Dane thought swiftly of this. He could not afford a run-in with Purdy now. On the other hand,

he would only be throwing his life away if he shot it out with Drew and his men. His one chance was to find Blake alone, or perhaps with Judge Yord and Hullinger. Again he regretted that he had not stayed with his original plan of kidnapping Blake.

For the moment the town seemed quiet enough. Whatever had brought on the firing had not resulted in a general fight, but Purdy would be riding high now. It wouldn't be long until he'd have the fight going.

Dane swung down the alley behind the Casino and hugging the wall, came around to one side and took a quick look through a window. Cross 7 was there idling along the bar, but neither Todd Blake nor Stony Drew were in sight. Dane cat-footed back to the alley, mentally tabulating the places where he might find Blake. The hotel. The jail. Ed Hullinger's house. Possibly Judge Yord's office.

The jail and the hotel were on the opposite side of the dust strip. Yord's office was directly ahead of Dane. He'd have his first look there, then Hullinger's house, and finally the jail and hotel.

Dane reached the back of Yord's office and sidling into the narrow space between it and the Mercantile, raised his head to the window. Todd Blake stood in the back, droopy lips held utterly sober, his big face strangely sad. Beady-eyed little Stony Drew sat along the wall, legs in front of him. Hullinger was pacing back and forth in front of Drew. Yord was not in sight.

"Yord ought to be here," Hullinger said. "He can kick up a hell of a lot of trouble for us if he gets with Weston. Where do you reckon he is?"

"Dunno," Blake answered tonelessly, "but I hate to turn the boys out to hunt him. They're watching the jail. No sense taking any chances now. Sooner or later that outfit'll tackle the jail, and the boys'll go to work."

Dane catfooted along the side of the building, reached the street, and ducking down, slid under the windows and strode on to the corner. Something had taken much of Blake's and Hullinger's confidence from them, and that something had to do with Curt Weston.

For a moment Dane stood considering this, knowing that it was a question of time. He could walk into Yord's office with his gun smoking, but even if he got Todd Blake, the gun thunder might prod Purdy and the others into tackling the jail and the fat would be in the fire. No, he had to find Yord, for the judge was the most important legal power in the country, and there was still the matter of Sue's and her brother's claim to Cross 7.

If Yord wanted to hide, there were a dozen places where he could safely keep out of trouble until the fight was over, but Yord had never struck Dane as being a man who would want to hide. Hullinger had said, "If he gets with Weston..." That might be exactly where he was.

THERE WERE lights in Curt Weston's store. Dane hurried toward it. Then he stopped and drew back, for Yord was coming out of the store. Dane waited in the gloom at the corner of the building. Yord turned toward his office, lamplight falling momentarily upon his face. He had, Dane saw, the look of a harassed and frantic man.

When he came opposite, Dane reached out, grabbed his shoulder, and pulled him off the walk. Yord started to yell, but the sound died in a choking gurgle, for Dane's hand was hard against his mouth. He said, "Quit it. I want to talk to you."

Yord relaxed. When Dane dropped his hand, he said, "You've been walking a tight rope for weeks, Ross. What in hell are you up to now?"

"And you've been bowing and scraping around after Todd Blake," Dane shot back.

Yord took a long sighing breath. "Ross, there comes a time in a man's life when he's got to quit calling himself a man, or get ready to die. I've reached that place now."

"Everybody knows Hullinger belongs to Blake," Dane prodded, "but there's some folks who figure you've got a little backbone. This morning when I saw Blake talking to you before the trial, I decided them folks

were wrong. You were like Hullinger, just taking orders."

Again Yord sucked in a breath, "I'm not like Hullinger. I thought Weston was telling the truth. I know now he wasn't, so I'll have to do something about it. Come on."

"How did you get it out of Weston?" Dane asked as he walked back toward Yord's office.

"I've just been talking to him," Yord said. "Tragedy comes in many ways, Ross, and it struck Curt Weston the minute Cherry walked into his store and told him she loved him. That was the one thing that could make Weston lie for Todd, but you and I know Cherry never aimed to keep her promise. Tonight Weston asked Cherry to marry him right away. She laughed in his face and said he was in his second childhood. She told him she wouldn't throw herself away on an old man. He shot and killed her and then shot himself. He's still alive, but I think he's dying. Doc's with him now."

The evil that Todd Blake had turned loose upon the town had come back to plague him. Dane remembered the expression on Blake's face. Cherry's death was the only thing that could have brought any sorrow to Todd Blake.

They had almost reached the judge's office. Dane said, "Blake's in here with Hullinger and Drew. They were wondering where you were."

"Good," Yord said. "Stay outside."

Yord jerked open the door of his office and stood there, breathing hard. Blake said in the same toneless voice Dane had heard before, "Where you been, Judge?"

"Talking to Weston. He's dying."

"Too bad. I wanted to see him hang."

"I'm wondering how soon you'll see yourself hang, Todd," Yord said.

Listening just outside the door, Dane knew that at last Judge Yord had found the courage it took to stand against the man he had bowed to. Hullinger must have sensed the same thing. He said, "If Todd hangs, you and me'll hang with him."

"That might be a good thing, Ed," Yord said. "I may have been a little short of guts at times, Todd. Like

when I helped you pull that business of Ross being in Cherry's room this evening, but I'm not short of guts now. I got Weston's whole story, and it's a hell of a lot more than I can stomach. Using your own girl to pull off a deal like you did is too much. You're the one who killed Cherry. Not Curt Weston."

Blake cried out like a wounded animal. "No, Judge, no."

DANE HEARD the click of a gun being brought to cock, heard Hullinger, "Your're fixing to run out on us, Judge. I'll have to kill you."

From where Dane stood between the door and the window, he could see Yord's back. He took a quick step forward, grabbed Yord's coat collar and jerked him out of the doorway.

Hullinger let out a scared oath. Dane motioned for Yord to keep still. It was his idea to play it out, for he knew what surprise and fear would do to the three men inside, but now he heard the thunder of hoofs and saw Sue and her brother break through a patch of light.

Diving inside, Dane threw his first shot at Hullinger who held a Colt in his hand. The lawman fired, the slug plopping into the wall behind Dane. Then Hullinger began to wilt. He fell sideways, head rapping on the floor.

Stony Drew was the gunman of the three, but his Colt was still in leather, for this had been Hullinger's play, and Drew had left it up to him. Now it took Drew an instant to draw and fire, for surprise slowed his hand. That instant was long enough for Dane to whip his gun up and drive a slug between his beady eyes.

That far it went exactly as Dane had planned it, but no farther, for he had failed to give fat Todd Blake the credit the man deserved. His hands were in the pockets of his baggy corduroy coat. Now he fired the two derringers that were there. One missed, but the second hit Dane in the thigh and spilled him to the floor, his gun dropping as he fell.

He had played it too fine! Dane grabbed for his .45 as Blake fumbled
(please turn to page 97)

A S BERTRAM and Sanders, president and secretary, respectively, of the Red Dog Cattlemen's Association, wheeled out of the ranch yard in the shiny new surrey, Jessie Fayton turned back into the house and resumed his seat at the dinner table. His wife, Hattie, said nothing, merely picked at the beans on her plate.

Jessie Fayton's sun-blackened face was stiff with an effort at unconcern. She had heard every word and he could see the knowledge in her face, the realization that he hadn't flatly

There was his wife to think of, and the ones who wanted him to fight, and the killer who figured he'd make a nice new notch...

refused them, that he had left it hanging.

"Your dinner's getting cold, Jessie."

There was a tenseness about her, her eyes a little bluer than normal, the way they got when she was disturbed or worried.

"It don't hurt beans to get cold, Hattie, they're still beans."

She could say that they hadn't starved yet. She could say a lot of things, that he was a rancher, not a gunfighter anymore. Not a lawman. That he wasn't losing any cows, that he had none that a thief would touch. No thief wanted a starving skeleton, they wanted fat cattle like those of Bertram and Sanders. She could say a lot of things, even about his vow not to take up the law trail anymore, sink or swim.

"Jessie," she said.

He looked up and saw her gaze on his plate and the tenseness was more pronounced now, the eyes darker still. He looked at his plate and saw the beans there pushed about to form a rough star. He scattered them with his fork.

"We could use that two hundred for each man jailed, Hattie. You heard Bertram say they'd take the risk of convictions. Just want reasonable evidence and the two hundred is mine. Six-eight hundred would pull us



The rifle jumped with a crashing report.

A HERO FOR HATTIE

by W. J. REYNOLDS

through another year and satisfy Cal-sers at the bank. We could use it."

Lord, how he could use it. He could lease a section from Bertram, the rancher had as good as said it. Water and grass. Without it he would have to take anything he could get, for Hattie, and the baby due in another six months.

Maybe even a lawman's job. A beggar....

Maybe he could even manage a fat calf for beef. These blamed beans! Beef and vegetables from the farmers over beyond the river. Things Hattie would need to keep her healthy...

His face was set tightly. It was very simple: If he took the job rounding up the thieves operating here, Calsers would take care of him at the bank, even if he was spread pretty thin. There would be money for necessities, food, water and grass. Simple—success or failure...

"You could catch them, couldn't you, Jessie? You already have your ideas about who they are. Your experience has told you that. You could stop them, but why can't the others? There're other men—ex-sheriffs, ex-marshals, ex-gunmen. Some of them must be available!"

IT WASN'T that easy. There were such men, plenty of them, but it would take time and letters and negotiations and more time. The thieves would take such a period to clean up, then lay low. Besides, the line was mighty thin among such men, between law and outlaw, and most of them loved the dollar and weren't too particular where it came from, or about shifting horses in the middle of the race. The cattlemen could lose a mighty lot of money before they got the right man...

Oh, the devil with it! He wanted to take the job for the money he so badly needed, but he couldn't go bluntly against Hattie's wishes. He could punch cows, or maybe Blayton up in Colorado still ran that sawmill and who'd said look him up when he starved out in Texas. Thirty a month.

"We'll make out, Hattie," he said with more ease now that he had rejected Bertram in his mind. "We have so far, we still can." He got up and went around the table to kiss her and she held his hand tightly, pressing it to her cheek.

"I love you, Jessie," she said. "Besides, I like beans!"

He saw the rider outside even before the hail, and left Hattie to step outside. "Howdy, Serles," he said. "Get down and sit awhile."

"Just dropped by a minute," Serles said, dismounting and coming to hunker with Jessie at the end of the house in the shade. "Was that Bertram's rig?"

"Yeah," Jessie said. "Bertram and Sanders."

There it is, Serles. Now if you're behind this thievery like I think you are, then the next move is yours. You'll want to stop me and you'll even pay the price...

Serles carefully rolled a cigarette and applied a match to it. His florid face and blunt jaws were impassive as his slightly walling hazel eyes moved to let his glance rake Jessie's face.

"Didn't figure your wife would like that, Jessie."

"She don't. She likes beans. I don't."

Serles stubbed out the smoke. "I sold off a bunch of cows a few days ago, Jessie. Before they started falling off. That leaves me with a couple sections of land on Mud Creek. Some water yet for a man handy with a shovel. Grass too, enough of both to keep a few head of cattle alive. Thought you might want it, Jessie."

A small shock ran through Jessie but it didn't show on his face. "Much obliged, but it's no use, I reckon. Even if I pulled a few through, they wouldn't help me much now. Can't pay the note much less buy winter feed, or feed me and Hattie. You can get a good price for that graze, Serles."

"You're a steady man, Jessie. It's no fault of yours that you've about gone under. A lot of men have with a better outfit than yours. I'll be glad to speak to Calsers at the bank and tell him you've got grass and water. No reason why he should take a few starving cattle when he could put out a little more and get his loan back with profit."

Don't be a fool, Fayton, take it! It'd keep you busy and Hattie happy, and there'd be no time to hunt cattle thieves.

But there's your pride. You never took bribe money yet and some of the offers were real juicy. You got a family, Fayton, a baby coming...

"It's a generous offer, Serles, and thanks. Rent it to Calsers, he'll be pasturing my cows now, and he can pay!" He stood up and Serles rose with him. "We got some beans left."

"Much obliged," Serles said turning back toward his horse. "Had the cook shake up an early snack 'fore I

left. Wish you'd think about that graze, Jessie."

JESSIE watched the big man ride off and disappear into the thinly scattered mesquite.

Jessie thought, *He was keeping his eyes skinned, he thought of me before Bertram made up his mind to ask me. He followed to see if Bertram came here, then he had to know if I'd taken the job. Serles won't give this up without a fight...*

Hattie said behind him, "I heard him, Jessie. How could you turn down such an offer? It would save you!" Her voice rose a little. "Jessie, are you that angry because I didn't want you to go manhunting again?"

He turned, his jaw set. He said evenly, "Hattie, there's something I never done in my life, and I won't start now. I haven't sunk low enough to start taking bribes!" He wheeled away to stalk toward the barn.

"Jessie!" she cried, her voice thinning with sudden fright. "Jessie, I'm sorry..."

"All right, honey," he called back gruffly. "We'll make out."

"Yes," she said. "Yes."

Jessie Fayton drove his wife into town the following Saturday for her regular checkup. When the examination was done, the doctor jerked his head at Jessie while Hattie freshened up in the dressing room. Jessie followed the big medico into the inner office.

"Jessie, are you taking Bertram's offer?"

"No."

"Did you turn him down definitely? There's talk that Bertram still thinks you might take it. Said you didn't flatly refuse."

"Well, guess I didn't, doc, but I will today if I see Bertram, and I will. He's always here on Saturday." He looked at the doctor's knobby face with more alertness. "You driving at something, doc?"

"Maybe you should have turned him down hard, Jessie. Judson is in town, and he's saying you killed his brother in Hays City. Quince Judson, hired killer, gunfighter. He's after you, Jessie."

So there it is, Fayton, things have

come to a devil of a pass when you've got to the point where you have to be wishy-washy and can't come right out and say yes or no. You wanted to make a success of the ranch so badly; for Hattie you couldn't be positive with Bertram. And you had to play lawman with Serles and not let him know you weren't taking it. And now he's got Judson on your tail, and Judson's tough and mean, and maybe he never had a brother but that man in Hays was named Judson, a half breed, it's excuse enough...

"Jessie!"

Jessie turned and saw Hattie there in the doorway, her face white, eyes fearful. She ran to him and he caught her in his arms, holding her tightly.

The decision came to Jessie with astonishing ease, and he kissed Hattie and grinned at her. "It's all right, honey," he said and as he went on, his voice held a new humbleness. "I've been making too much of my pride, Hattie, I couldn't seem to remember that I had a wife and a new kind of life that I like. We'll make out as well as some of our neighbors, with a wife like you, maybe better! Cauley said he'd give me fifty dollars credit on my pistols—let's go take them to him and buy us some groceries!"

"Luck, son," the medico said softly. "And I wouldn't stay in town longer than I had to—or listen to any wild talk."

"We won't," Jessie said. "And the talk won't bother me much. All the yakking will be from the barroom heroes who've smelled their powder-smoke second hand." With Hattie, he walked down the outside stairs to the street.

As they started for the wagon, Hattie said, "There's the town marshal, Jessie. Why don't he run Judson out of town? Or jail him. Isn't there a reward for Quince Judson?"

"Yes. But Clark is no gunfighter. He can keep order here usually, but he's not a young man anymore, and he's no match for Judson. Clark will let him alone if he can. You know how it is, Hattie. There's no charge against Judson in this town or county. It's how men like Judson thrive and move about so freely. Clark, if he could,

could kill Judson and collect the reward. But he won't because he can't."

He got the pair of pistols from the wagon, hardly glancing at the cleanly shining weapons in the plain leather holsters, he started walking with Hattie toward Cauley's store. They went inside and Jessie laid the six-shooters on the counter.

SEVERAL customers stared at the weapons then at Jessie Fayton and Hattie and they whispered together, then a man left the store hurriedly. It was Jessie's plain answer to Bertram and Judson. He didn't aim to fight or take the job. Judson would hear it shortly, and Serles. Serles would call off his gunfighter.

If he can, Jessie thought. Judson is mean, and adding my name, adding Jessie Fayton to his gun rep, would be no mean accomplishment. Judson would be drinking and blood-hungry, and maybe Serles couldn't handle him...

There was a sudden urgency in Jessie to be out of town and at home. Home with his wife. "Get what you want, Hattie," he said. "I'll get the wagon and bring it around to the side porch to load up." He walked quickly out the door.

He spoke quietly to several acquaintances as he moved purposefully toward his wagon. The town was filling up, wagons and buggies and buckboards and horses. Saturday, trade day for the country people. Most of them would spend the entire day in town, exchanging news items for news items, gossiping to fill the long days until next town going. Usually Jessie and Hattie did the same. But not today.

He lingered at the wagon, fiddling with the harness, tightening a hub cap, tightening the wagon rod that held the tailgate firmly in place. Then finally he drove the wagon to the water trough, let the horses drink and backed them away again and drove back to Cauley's store, hoping that he'd killed enough time for Hattie to have her buying done.

There was a growing unease in Jessie. He noted the eddying of the crowd, the way they talked hurriedly

and the way they glanced at him then away again if he looked at them.

The devil with them. Why should he worry what they thought? He had a family, too; his first duty lay there.

But he was better qualified, he'd had experience. He could take Judson all right and break this thing up quickly...

And then he remembered again what it really was—his damned pride. He wanted to do it...

Jessie backed the wagon up to the small loading porch and jumped to the ground. If Hattie was ready they could clear out.

The sound that was not a sound but the lack of it, struck Jessie forcibly. He knew that coursing chill, the deadly silence, too well.

His glance whipped upward and across the street to the Big Ben Saloon. Judson stood on the porch, his flaring eyes upon Jessie Fayton. He held a pistol in his hand, slanted downward.

"Fayton," Judson said with rising power. "Fayton!"

Jessie half lifted his hands. "I'm not armed, Judson."

"Don't hand me that!" Judson shouted then. "Don't hand me that. You carry a hideout, Fayton. You damn backshooter! The way you killed my brother in Hays. Get that gun, Fayton!"

Jessie stood there helplessly, knowing that any move would get him killed, or no move, in another second. There was anger in Jessie then, and a fatalistic calm. Of all the blame fool things...

A WOMAN screamed shrilly and the door from the store slapped back before Hattie's flying figure and she screamed again as she threw herself upon Jessie. Judson's gun blasted heavily with Hattie's scream and she cried out again.

Jessie, even as he fell under Hattie, felt the shock of the bullets strike, and he knew in the same instant that it wasn't himself that was hit but Hattie.

"Run, Jessie!" Hattie cried shrilly, desperately. "Run, Jessie—"

Judson's second shot came in the same breath as the rifle's heavy re-

port. Then the rifle spoke again and Judson lunged out into the street to fall over his smoke-wisping pistol.

Hattie was very still, and Jessie was suddenly scrambling to his feet, terror seizing him as he saw Hattie's deathly white face, and then he saw the blood on her dress. He shouted hoarsely and grabbed her up in his arms and ran for the stairs and the doctor's office.

"Hattie's shot!" Jessie shouted. "Hattie's shot! Do something, doc, damn it, do something!"

He stared fearfully as the doctor jerked Hattie's dress unceremoniously upward to expose the six-inch blue mark in the flesh of her hip with the bloody holes at either end.

The medico scowled disgustedly at Jessie. "You can try and gather your wits, Jessie; she'll be over this in a week!" He added gruffly, "If it don't get infected."

Jessie sleeved sweat from his face and the panic slowly died out of him. He looked at the rifle leaning against the wall and said, "It was you who shot Judson."

"I did," the medico said. "I figure it's about time folks stopped letting the Judsons have a free run of the country. What the devil kind of law is it that lets such as him tank up in public, all the time jawing about what he'll do to somebody soon as he get his guts worked up in a sweat?"

"There'll be Judsons," Jessie said, "as long as there's men to pay them."

"Suppose," the doctor said, working a cleaning probe at the wound, "that this drought breaks, Jessie, and you come out all right along with your neighbors? Most of you will, you know, there's always something left. Suppose that, and one day you start losing some fat steers, you going to twiddle your fingers? If these folks knew who to jump, they'd hang somebody right quick. They just thought you could find the thieves a lot quicker than they could."

The doc's right, Hattie, it's not a question of pride or being a family man or any of that, this is our fight too. There'll be something left. There'll be us, Hattie

Jessie stood up. "Can I take your rifle, doc?"

The doctor didn't look up. "Sure, Jessie. Six shots still left in it."

Jessie picked up the Spencer and cast a glance at Hattie.

The doctor said quickly, "She'll be all right, Jessie."

Jessie passed swiftly out of the room and down the stairs to the street. Once there he paused for a moment, watching several men pass into the drugstore with Judson's limp body.

SUDDENLY then, men were looking at Jessie Fayton, standing there so still with the big rifle slanted in his hand. The talk died and they watched him silently as he started down the street toward the Big Ben then some of them came quickly, quietly behind him.

Bertram and Sanders, with Calsers of the bank, were coming out of the Big Ben. They looked at Jessie Fayton, moved aside for him to step into the saloon, then they turned and went back inside behind him.

Room was quickly made at the bar and Jessie put his back to it and surveyed the now silent place with the quick, sliding glances that missed little. Serles sat at a table against the wall, a whiskey bottle before him that was half empty. He was cold sober and his eyes were uneasy.

Jessie said, "There was a lot of talk about hiring me to clean up the thieving around here. It scared certain parties into bringing in Judson to kill me. But Judson wanted me to be another notch on his gun butt, and the cattle thief couldn't handle him. And my wife was almost killed. I almost made the fatal mistake of thinking this wasn't my fight."

Bertram said eagerly, "You'll take the job, Jessie?"

"Not as you're thinking, no," Jessie said. "I'll take it as a citizen of this community and I'll expect other citizens to lend a hand."

"You name the tune, Jessie," Bertram said. "We'll dance to it."

"The thieves themselves, I think, will leave in a hurry, after tonight," Jessie said. "But there's one who can't—the big man who was backing the thieves. A rancher."

There was a strained silence. Ber-

tram said, "You know who, Jessie?"

"I've known, actually, for several days now. Ever since he offered me grass and water to stay clear of the rustling. As a bribe."

The Spencer jumped with the crashing report, and smoke swirled across the room to mingle with the smoke from Serles' pistol. The rancher was on his feet, then the pistol fell from his hand and he fell over it.

Jessie said, "He was the head man, Bertram. The others will likely be gone tomorrow, but we can make a search to be sure. Shake a rope, ask some pointed questions, and their dust won't settle for two days." He walked out amid the welter of noise.

Once outside he sighed heavily be-

fore he walked hurriedly toward the doctor's office.

"Jessie," Calsers said behind him and Jessie turned and the banker said, "I'm calling a directors' meeting, Jessie. Come in tomorrow if you can and we'll talk about your situation. If the bank is stretched too thin, I think I can manage a personal loan."

"All right," Jessie said. "Much obliged." He hurried on again.

We'll make out, Hattie. When folks work together, it's funny how easy problems are solved...

He saw Hattie's anxious face at the second-story window and he waved, and then ran lightly up the stairs. ●END

SATAN'S SEGUNDO

a belt gun from his holster, felt the warm trickle of blood on his leg. All of his hopes rolled back into his mind in that short interval of time, of Sue and their love and their future. His fingers folded around the black butt of his gun, pronged the hammer back, and he realized he was too slow. Todd Blake loomed before him, wide and thick and soft, black eyes almost hidden behind those rolls of fat.

A gun sounded from the doorway. Yord swore in disappointment, for the bullet missed, but it worried Blake as he was squeezing off a shot at Dane. His slug splintered the floor beside Dane's head. Then Dane let go, his bullet catching Blake just above the nose. The fat man dropped his gun, great head rolling, and he went down, slowly and ponderously.

There was the thunder of boots on the boardwalk as the Cross 7 men came running along it. Yord stopped them with, "Todd's dead. So's Cherry. Cross 7 will be taking orders from Miss Sue now."

"And my orders are for you to finish your drinking and go home," Sue called. "There will be no more trouble between Cross 7 and the upper valley men. You hear that, Purdy?"

THERE WERE other men running across the street, and Lorn Freed called, "Purdy ain't here, ma'am. After the boys got it through their

(continued from page 91)

heads about what happened in Cherry's room, they made it a mite hot for Steve, so I reckon he'll be riding for a long time. It wasn't that he was helping Todd. He was just so blamed jealous of Dane he couldn't keep his mouth shut."

"Get the sawbones," Jones called. "Ross is hit."

"I'll get him," Freed said.

This Dane Ross heard as he lay on the floor of Judge Yord's office, and for the first time in months he felt at peace with himself. Then Sue was kneeling beside him, her hair touching his face. He said, "You shouldn't have come back to town."

"I had to," she said simply. "You have your pride about your place and I have my pride about fighting my own battles. So I argued with George and won, but we didn't get here soon enough."

"Plenty soon." He caught her hand. "I didn't know you savvyed how I felt about marrying a woman who bossed her own outfit."

She stopped and kissed him. "I savvy a lot about you, Dane, and I love all of it. We'll put George on Cross 7. You know, I was thinking some curtains on your front windows would sort of brighten things up."

He grinned. It was fair enough to let her have her way about the cabin.

1905 ●END

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